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GENDER EQUITY
EDITION

partners

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About Partners

Partners in Research for Development is the quarterly publication of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). *Partners* presents articles that summarise results from ACIAR-brokered research projects and puts ACIAR research initiatives into perspective.

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Front cover: A female farm worker harvesting onions in Pakistan, where an ACIAR-supported value chain project has worked with communities to improve incomes and employment opportunities. Photo: ACIAR

Back cover: A woman harvesting vegetables in the Philippines as part of an ACIAR-supported project to address climate vulnerabilities. Photo: ACIAR



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From the CEO

Andrew Campbell

This is my last editorial for *Partners*, as my 7-year term as the chief executive officer of ACIAR will conclude at the end of July. I'm delighted that this coincides with a gender theme for this edition, because the journey we have been on in ACIAR in promoting gender equity is something I reflect on with pride.

From a moral and equity perspective, it seems obvious that half the human population deserves the same opportunities as the other half. In smallholder agriculture in low- and middle-income countries, women provide much of the labour, but often lack access to resources and decision-making.

When women and girls are given equal opportunities and access to power and resources, the evidence of multiple benefits is clear: farm productivity improves, as does food and nutrition security, and social and economic benefits such as investment in children's education.

When I was appointed as CEO of ACIAR by the then Foreign Minister Julie Bishop in 2016, while ACIAR had technically strong and highly experienced science leadership, it was conspicuously male. Only 2 of the 18 most senior positions (11%) in the organisation were occupied by women. Minister Bishop made it clear to me that she wanted ACIAR to no longer be 'a best-kept secret' and that she was expecting to see demographic change within ACIAR.

Gender initiatives within ACIAR

With strong support from a new ACIAR executive and the Commission for International Agricultural Research, our new ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2018–2027 had empowering women and girls as one of 6 high-level objectives. We formed an internal Gender Committee led by Dr Jayne Curnow, which oversaw the development of a complementary Gender Equity Policy and Strategy, informed by a consultancy undertaken by Professor Sharon Bell.

That strategy recognised that ACIAR could not be effective in advocating for women's empowerment in our outward-facing research programs if we were not 'walking the talk' internally. It set targets of 40:40:20 for staff appointments within ACIAR – at least 40% of positions at each level should be women and at least 40% should be men, with the other 20% allowing flexibility.

By 2019, with proactive recruitment, we had slightly overshot the targets in our gender strategy, as 70% of senior roles in ACIAR, including 7 of 10 Research Program Managers, were women, as were 4 of 7 Commissioners. Now it is back to 50:50 at senior levels within ACIAR.

We have made this profound transition internally, with ongoing internal leadership now provided through the Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) Committee chaired by Professor Ann Fleming and Ms Eleanor Dean. Combined with relevant training for all staff, we are more confident in promoting gender equity across our portfolio and more broadly, as the many examples in this edition of *Partners* illustrates vividly.

External initiatives

Within the CGIAR, we worked closely with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Canadian Government through Global Affairs Canada and our friends at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to advocate strongly for and fund a new CGIAR Gender Platform as a centre of excellence and resources for the CGIAR and for international agricultural research globally. It is great to read more about that in this edition. We continue to convene a 'friends of gender' group among CGIAR donors.

We convened and hosted the Seeds of Change Conference at the University of Canberra in February 2019, which attracted 280 delegates from 45 countries to share knowledge, insights and best practice examples of women's empowerment in agricultural research for development.

We established the Meryl Williams Fellowship providing mid-career leadership training for women in our region, adapted from the highly successful AWARD program funded by the Gates Foundation in Africa. Consistent with our gender strategy, we ensured that at least half of all places in the John Allwright and John Dillon Fellowship programs would go to women. We provided



ACIAR CEO Andrew Campbell and Foreign Minister Penny Wong have launched the updated ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2018–2027. Photo: ACIAR

specialist support and guidance to research teams to improve the gender component of their proposals.

I look forward to seeing how this journey towards ever more inclusive approaches to our work unfolds over coming years, shaped by the many leaders featured in the following pages.

Challenges ahead

As I reflect more broadly on the last 7 years, I'm conscious that we have achieved a great deal, but the challenges remain formidable.

The 'converging insecurities' of food security, water security, energy security, biosecurity and health security – all interacting with each other, and all amplified by climate change and associated extreme weather events – continue to intensify, directly affecting billions of people.

The independent mid-term review of the ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2018–2027 concluded that the strategy is bold and remains fit for purpose, notwithstanding the major disruptions caused by COVID-19, but that ACIAR now needs to be even more ambitious in our research portfolio and our partnerships.

In response to the review, we have an updated 10-Year Strategy endorsed by the Foreign Minister, Senator the Hon Penny Wong. It sets out 6 strategic changes to be implemented over the next 5 years, including the development of more ambitious transformational research initiatives, to which we will reallocate 30% of investment within our bilateral research and capacity-building programs. I will follow the development of these initiatives with interest.

Leading ACIAR has been a highlight of my career. It has been an honour and a privilege to work with so many talented, committed people within ACIAR and among our partners, in Australia and overseas. ACIAR is a mighty little organisation doing vitally important work, staffed by and partnering with great people.

Thank you to everyone who has been on this journey with us, and best wishes for your future endeavours. 🌱

Andrew Campbell
Chief Executive Officer, ACIAR



Building gender equity and social inclusion through new strategy

A new strategy will integrate gender equity and social inclusion measures into all ACIAR research, investments and operations to build inclusive systems that reduce inequality and improve food security for those most vulnerable.

More women and people with disadvantaged or marginalised statuses will be involved in designing, implementing and monitoring ACIAR-supported projects as part of a newly developed ACIAR Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) Strategy and Action Plan.

The new strategy was developed through the ACIAR GESI committee, co-chaired by Professor Ann Fleming, Research Program Manager, Fisheries, and Ms Eleanor Dean, General Manager, Outreach and Capacity Building.

Ms Dean said the rigorously developed strategy would integrate GESI into all of ACIAR work and amplify its efforts to meet its research-for-development objectives in the region.

'Our ultimate purpose is to improve food security in developing countries and the lives of the world's poorest people,' said Ms Dean. 'And if we have an intentional approach to gender and social inclusion, we can do a better job in that regard.'

Professor Fleming said involving people from diverse backgrounds in projects brings a broader range of skills and insights to project designs. This will help develop the innovative responses to inequality needed to better tackle the complex social and environmental issues in the region – and improve outcomes for women and others with marginalised statuses.

A new action plan

ACIAR launched its Gender Equity Policy and Strategy 2017–2022 to articulate and commit to working towards organisational policies and development outcomes that improve the lives of women and girls.

Consultations with ACIAR staff, in Australia and in partner countries, revealed that ACIAR work on gender equity and social inclusion over the period of the first strategy resulted in some successes and learning, but there was still a need and commitment to be more effective.

Responding to the demand of ACIAR staff for bolder aspirations and stronger engagement, a new strategy and action plan was developed to 'build on and build better' to amplify the ACIAR commitment to gender equity and social inclusion.

The ACIAR GESI Strategy and Action Plan 2023–2027 recognises that the efforts to bring about change will be needed at different scales, from households and communities to national and regional policies.

Key points

- 1 The ACIAR GESI Strategy and Action Plan 2023–2027 will provide a comprehensive roadmap to achieve meaningful and lasting gender equality and social inclusion throughout the organisation and its partners.
- 2 The strategy is underpinned by 10 guiding principles and includes a detailed action plan, and theory of change mapping the pathways and steps needed to achieve impact.
- 3 A funded virtual GESI Hub will be established to lead and coordinate GESI integration across ACIAR operations.



Recognising the role of women in farming systems helps to improve the impact of new practices, such as the sustainable intensification technologies adopted by this family in Tanzania as part of an ACIAR-supported project. Photo: ACIAR

A strategy to reduce inequality

The strategy was developed with the Stockholm Environment Institute's (SEI) Asian-based Gender, Environment and Development team. They drew on global GESI good practice and consulted extensively with ACIAR staff and partners.

It is underpinned by 10 guiding principles and includes a detailed action plan that will be overseen by a specially created GESI Hub.

The strategy includes a Theory of Change created by Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) specialist Tracey Delaney at Outcomes Matter to map the pathways and steps required to achieve intended impacts. The MEL framework aims to ensure appropriate metrics are gathered to accurately monitor success and to help ACIAR learn for ongoing improvement.

Inclusion for transformative impact

SEI senior research fellow Dr Cynthia McDougall said the new strategy has been built on substantial groundwork in GESI and is underpinned by a history of authentic engagement with stakeholders.

It gives ACIAR the opportunity to lead meaningful change in the region as it strives for transformative impacts that advance gender equity and social inclusion by addressing underlying causes of inequality.

'It is a critical time to double down on social and gender equity. Having a clear, effective and ambitious strategy by an organisation like ACIAR that other organisations look to for leadership in this space is incredibly important,' said Dr McDougall.

Research on GESI-related topics proposed as part of the strategy will also help to unpack drivers of inequality in particular contexts and identify pathways to transformation.



A broader vision

The new GESI Strategy builds on ACIAR Gender Equity Policy and Strategy 2017–2022 that laid some important foundations including achieving gender parity among ACIAR research program managers.

The GESI Strategy expands its remit to include social inclusion, and also frames gender beyond binary definitions to include a spectrum of gender identities, said graduate research officer Mr Isaac Ewald, who helped coordinate project activities on the ground. Mr Ewald said this will enable these often disadvantaged and overlooked people to be considered within research design and implementation.

In developing the strategy, SEI led focus groups involving Australian-based ACIAR staff as well as its offices and partners throughout the regions.

ACIAR South Asia Assistant Country Manager Ms Chetali Chhabra and Philippines Assistant Country Manager Ms Mara Faylon facilitated interaction between the GESI Committee, SEI and the ACIAR Country Network.

Ms Chhabra said staff at the 11 ACIAR country offices have a nuanced cultural understanding of the regions and partners they work with, and it was essential to include their advice in developing the strategy.

‘Having that process of co-learning and co-producing research with women, socially marginalised groups, and local scientists ... will have more impact and more buy-in ...’

Effective implementation

Using regionally relevant approaches, drawing on local knowledge and involving people from the community in project implementation are highlighted among the 10 guiding principles at the heart of the strategy.

ACIAR is also committing to provide adequate funding and human resources to effectively implement the strategy, which includes the appointment of social scientist Dr Rebecca Shellock who will lead implementation.

Dr Shellock is based at the University of Tasmania’s Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies, where she has been researching barriers to women’s participation and leadership in marine science.

Her first task for ACIAR will be to activate the GESI Hub – a funded virtual operational centre as an interface for ACIAR staff and partners.

Walking the walk


‘Because the GESI Strategy is coordinated through the GESI Hub, rather than a collection of individual projects, it will have the capacity to facilitate meaningful, ongoing change that can be built upon over time,’ said Dr Shellock.

The GESI Hub will support the ACIAR Country Network, local partners and stakeholders in tailoring the GESI approaches to local contexts. The hub will also encourage and champion ACIAR-supported projects that recognise and value diverse forms and sources of knowledge, such as Indigenous and local perspectives.

‘Having that process of co-learning and co-producing research with women, socially marginalised groups, and local scientists and building those partnerships and relationships, will make sure that research will have more impact and more buy-in, and that’s what will make it successful,’ explained Dr Shellock.

Dr Shellock will also undertake GESI-focused research herself. This will include monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the GESI action plan across ACIAR programs, and how research for development contributes to (or limits) equality.

‘Impact will be measured via a rigorous monitoring, evaluation and learning process that will be central to my work and central to looking at the next strategy and action plan,’ said Dr Shellock.

Professor Fleming said outcomes will be enabled by the strategy that will include a broad representation of gender and culture through its teams and leadership. And bringing diverse perspectives and knowledge systems together would help to find solutions to complex issues. 

Building partnerships and relationships facilitated through the GESI Hub is just one way research will have more impact and buy-in. Photo: ACIAR





A farmer leader trains women in tomato nursery best practices, helping to create new skills and business opportunities for women. Photo: CABI

Expanding roles for women in Pakistan's vegetable value chains

Improved onion harvesting, growing tomato seedlings and grading seed potatoes – each of these is increasing the value of crops for vegetable growers in Pakistan, expanding roles for women and increasing the standing of women in local communities.

The innovative use of female social mobilisers and a whole-of-family extension approach has created opportunities for women to participate in training to improve the value of vegetable crops and incomes for smallholder farmers in Pakistan.

Smallholders make up 70% of Pakistan's farming community, in which men and women have defined roles in agricultural systems and social practices that can restrict the involvement of women.

The international not-for-profit organisation CABI (Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International) has led a 5-year ACIAR-supported project to improve the vegetable value chains for smallholders, which concluded in December 2022.

The project focused on value chains for onions in the Sindh province, and for tomatoes and potatoes in the Punjab province. Developing a model for a gender-inclusive value chain was a fundamental part of the project.

CABI project manager Mr Muhammad Asif said social mobilisers employed in each of the 3 value chains played a critical role in the multidisciplinary research teams, helping to engage female farmers and farm workers to implement project activities.

'Women have designated roles in farming, and these are often the roles that are crucial to improving the value of produce.

'The project as a whole helped to move farmers from a production to a market-driven approach,' said Mr Asif.



‘Whole families were involved in the value-chain discussions, so we were engaging youth with this new perspective as well.’

The project team directly trained 343 vegetable farmers (172 men, 135 women and 36 youth) in nursery production, crop management, post-harvest processes and marketing, indirectly reaching another 1,166 farmers (779 men, 291 women and 96 youth).

Mr Asif said the 67 project staff included 45 men and 22 women, who identified value-chain constraints and developed interventions to increase product quality and production efficiency. The result was a significant increase in household income and crop gross margins per acre for the 5 villages involved.

Catering for local culture

Gender research leader Dr Gomathy Palaniappan, from The University of Queensland, led the social research activities in the project.

She said working with the established gender roles in the community was built into the project, catering for local cultural practices. This included adding female social mobilisers to the project team, and convincing male farmers to allow female farmers and farm labourers to speak with female project staff separately.

‘We were fortunate to find women to take on the role who were based near the villages we were working with, or who were connected to the villages, and could visit regularly for both formal and informal conversations without being seen as intruders.

‘They were able to build trust, to identify male champions who supported female family members taking part, as

well as female champions who were willing to take on the training, and even to train others,’ explained Dr Palaniappan.

Longer-lasting onions in Sindh

The Sindh province is a major centre for onion production in Pakistan and CABI Research Officer Mr Azeem Naqvi said that early research identified harvest processes carried out by women were critical to improving the quality of produce.

Even though the research team provided training to men about the importance of harvesting practices, Mr Naqvi said they realised that training women directly was essential to implementing the improvements.

He highlighted the role of the Sindh team’s female social mobiliser Ms Iqra Rajput as key to gaining support within the community to allow women access to the training. This in turn accelerated the adoption of the improved practices.

Ms Rajput was already known to locals through her father’s business in the village. She was able to identify male farmers who supported the provision of women with access to new information and skills, and she often provided training to women herself.

As a result of a simple change in the way tops are cut from the onion bulbs and infield ‘curing’ of onions, female farmers were able to extend the shelf life of onions from 4 to 6 months, while improving quality and reducing spoilage.

At market, onion growers received a 67% premium for their crop, and the new skills of female harvesters earned them a 20% increase in pay.



Training sessions developed for female farmers and farm workers in onion, tomato and potato vegetable chains is improving the value of crops and providing new income opportunities. Photo: CABI

Key points

- 1 Value-chain research in Pakistan is helping smallholder farmers to grow better-quality onions, tomatoes and potatoes, and increase market returns.
- 2 Female social mobilisers and a whole-of-family extension approach improved engagement with men, women and youth to increase women’s involvement in field activities and accelerate the adoption of improved farming practices.
- 3 This has created new opportunities for women through improved skills, self-esteem and ability to increase family incomes.



Tomato nursery enterprises

Punjab is a major growing region for both tomatoes and potatoes, and 2 villages producing each crop took part in the project.

In the tomato-growing villages, women's activities include producing seedlings. They commonly establish nursery plots near their homes, and seedlings are later planted out into family fields or sold to other farmers.

Value-chain analysis identified that improving the quality of seedlings could improve the health and yields of plants, improving total productivity, quality and incomes for smallholder farmers.

Through the female social mobiliser Ms Narjis Fatima, the project team was able to introduce the concept of improved nursery production to local women. This includes the use of seedling trays, quality potting mix and a protective greenhouse tunnel they share the use of, all of which have helped to increase germination rates and produce more vigorous seedlings.

Tomato farmers using these seedlings earned a 28% price increase for the improved quality of their tomatoes. Nursery skills have created new income opportunities, with 2 women establishing their own enterprises to sell seedlings to local farmers and neighbouring villages.

Initially, 2 women took on the new nursery practices, and this grew to more than 20 women over 3 years, with the use of nursery-raised seedlings becoming a recognised practice in local villages.

From seed potatoes to kitchen gardens

In the potato-growing region of Punjab, women play a role in grading potatoes at harvest. The project's technical research identified that in addition to grading the harvested crop, grading seed potatoes and applying a fungicide prior to planting could reduce disease in the crop and improve the yields and quality of the harvest.

The project team worked with the local farming communities, and with individual farming families, to incorporate these new activities into the role of female farmers and farm workers.

Social mobiliser Ms Rahila Ishaq said part of her role was to make women aware of how they could work with the men in their lives to improve family incomes. This proved an important motivating factor for some participants in the project, expanding their view to beyond the boundaries of their own village for work, and for the education of their children.

'As a result of their new skills through the ACIAR-supported project, there are now groups of 10 to 15 female labourers who travel to nearby villages to work,' said Ms Ishaq.



Learning to grade seed potatoes has provided new opportunities for women, also helping to improve the health and quality of crops. Photo: CABI

Her work also highlights the value of social mobilisers in addressing local needs beyond the immediate scope of the project.

Ms Ishaq said through her engagement with women in their homes, she was able to help them start kitchen gardens, which were previously unknown in the area. The project team helped to source seed for summer and winter vegetables and provided training in seed preservation for future crops.

Over 3 years, the number of women with kitchen gardens increased from 3 to 25, providing families with fresh vegetables, improving their diets and saving money.

Collectively, social mobilisers have also helped to connect families with access to government and healthcare services and assisted children with schoolwork. They have acted as role models, travelling independently and demonstrating how women can contribute to family incomes working beyond the boundaries of their home villages.

ACIAR Research Program Manager, Horticulture, Ms Irene Kernot said economic and social outcomes for women have been an important part of the project, in addition to the improved production and value from crops for families.

'As a result of new skills learned through the project, many female participants have increased their income through better connection to the value chain and have gained confidence from families and communities as contributors to improved livelihoods.

'Younger family members, both boys and girls, have also been exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking that will shape future farming practices and their own aspirations,' said Ms Kernot. 🌱

ACIAR PROJECT: 'Strengthening vegetable value chains in Pakistan for greater community livelihood benefits' (HORT/2016/012)



Financial literacy empowers Africa's women and youth in agriculture

Helping women and young people access finance and develop financial literacy skills has been an essential part of the success of agribusiness projects in Eastern and Southern Africa.

An Australia–Canada program that fosters innovation and business skills among women and young people is generating new business and employment opportunities in these agricultural communities.

The initiative, Cultivate Africa's Future Fund (CultiAF), is a partnership between ACIAR and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It funds research in food security, resilience and gender equity for smallholder farmers.

Ms Mercy Rurii, CultiAF program officer at IDRC, explained that CultiAF projects have a two-step approach. The first focuses on finding innovations and technologies that can improve productivity, nutrition, water management and adaptation to climate change impacts on smallholder agricultural workers.

The second step refines and scales up the identified innovations and technologies, with gender considerations central to every project.

Malawi fish processing

A recent project in Malawi in south-eastern Africa scaled up the adoption of improved fish processing technologies.

'Fish processing was done in the open, in unsanitary conditions with exposure to pests and dust,' said Ms Rurii. 'So we looked at what was required to improve the conditions, provide longer shelf life and meet the standards to supply higher-value supermarkets.'

The project showed that improved access to fish smoking kilns and solar tent dryers was an effective way to reduce post-harvest losses, estimated at around 34%. Losses negatively impacted both the fish supply and incomes, especially for women who are often more involved in fish processing than men.

The CultiAF project then looked at ways to increase access to these technologies. This included finding a way



The CultiAF youth agripreneurs program has helped Ms Sylla Aisha build her lettuce-growing business. Photo: Georgina Smith

for women to access the financial resources needed to build or install the kilns and solar dryer. Negotiations resulted in finding a bank that would offer a 2% lower interest rate for women.

The finance was further supported by the bank, which provided dedicated resources specialising in agricultural financing and financial literacy training for the project's participants.

'You need to make sure they understand the process – filling in questionnaires, financial tracking, keeping books. The project gave us a platform to begin to understand what you need to build a financial inclusion project for women,' said Ms Rurii.

The project gave us a platform to begin to understand what you need to build a financial inclusion project for women.



Youth agripreneurship in Kenya

A youth agripreneurs project in Kenya also had gender-inclusive financial guidance at its core. The project was designed to encourage more young people under 35 to engage in agribusiness.

Professor Amos Njuguna, project leader and professor of finance at the United States International University, Africa, said a successful small project focused on business training for youth in fish and poultry value chains.

This was then scaled up over 18 months, expanding the value chains eligible for business training and adding financing and mentorship.

'The training helped people develop business plans, but sometimes they needed someone to connect them to finance resources, or someone to guide them further as they implemented what they had learned,' said Professor Njuguna.

'The main objective was to determine whether the investment in training, mentorship and access to finance for young people can contribute to two things: better business performance and employment creation.'

Gender-inclusive aspects were embedded into the project from the start, using feedback from beneficiaries to inform the programming. For example, men generally wanted the training to be away from their home districts, but 85% of women wanted the training to be near their homes due to caregiving responsibilities and attachment to their environment.


The project also found that men were more likely to receive funding than women, so the project also included de-risking participants. This was achieved by teaching financial literacy and including finance providers from the beginning so they could communicate what they were looking for. It also allowed the finance providers to

see how the program prepared participants to achieve business success.

Professor Njuguna said the program has had lasting impacts through creating businesses that go on to employ other young people. It has been used by local governments to improve their agribusiness strategies and has created mentors who can continue to train more people.

'Some women who participated in the program have gone on to translate the learning materials into their local language and start training fellow women,' said Professor Njuguna. 'And, for me, that's huge when someone decides "now I can do even more than smallholder farming and train others within my region".'

These projects demonstrate how innovative research can be tailored to meet local needs, consider the different needs of male and female participants and contribute to successful outcomes, with the participants themselves carrying the work forward and continuing the momentum for change. Dr Leah Ndungu, ACIAR Regional Manager, Eastern and Southern Africa, highlighted this as part of the ongoing value of the CultiAF program, which leverages the collaborative investment of ACIAR and IDRC for greater impact.

'CultiAF supports innovative research with the potential for breakthrough results that could be effectively scaled up and easily adopted along the value chain to improve food security in Eastern and Southern Africa,' said Dr Ndungu. 

ACIAR PROJECT: 'Business models for scaling improved fish processing technologies in Malawi' (GP/2019/170); 'The effectiveness of the Metro Agri-Food Living Lab for gender inclusive youth entrepreneurship development in Kenya' (GP/2019/172)

A young agripreneur in Nairobi, Mr Samuel Thuo Irungu collects potatoes from rural areas to sell to town businesses. Photo: Georgina Smith, CIAT



Key points

- 1 CultiAF funds research in food security, resilience and gender equity for smallholder farmers in Eastern and Southern Africa.
- 2 Financial literacy was central to a Malawi fish processing project helping women to access funds for technologies to improve fish processing and reduce losses.
- 3 A youth agripreneurs program in Kenya offered business training and helped 'de-risk' women as loan applicants to support business development and increase employment for young people.



Gender equity to maximise research impacts

HER+ will engage women in decisions and investments in food systems and technologies, including improved crop varieties such as these beans being grown in Tanzania. Photo: Georgina Smith, CIAT

Gender equity is being placed front and centre in global agricultural research and extension through HER+, a world-first initiative of CGIAR and a unique hub for gender expertise to support all CGIAR centres and partners.

HER+ is a research program to produce evidence-backed experience and data to support the gender equity policies being developed and implemented through gender researchers within CGIAR.

The overarching goal, and part of the GENDER Impact Platform, is to have gender equity drive the transformation of food systems and embed gender research as a natural basis for CGIAR agricultural development. It will do this by placing it at the forefront of planning and extension.

Director of the GENDER Impact Platform Dr Nicoline de Haan said the underlying objective of both the platform and the HER+ research initiative is to ensure women can be part of the decision-making that directs changes in food systems.

This is considered particularly significant as low-income, resource-poor smallholder farmers around the world face increasing challenges from climate change, diminishing land and water resources, and weakened ecosystems.

Research shows that climate stresses disproportionately harm women as they are more likely to go hungry in the aftermath of extreme weather events and crop failures, compared to men.

Further evidence shows that many agricultural tools and technologies developed to improve agriculture's climate resilience have reinforced, rather than closed, gender gaps.

Evidence base

A core objective of the HER+ research will be to identify and test climate solutions that work for both women and men, and to record evidence of best practices and lessons learned.

'HER+ is about giving women the tools, the space and the respect that allows them to have an equal say in what happens in their food and farming systems,' said Dr de Haan, who is based at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) in Kenya.



Dr de Haan said that on one level the impact platform and HER+ are about fundamental equality and fairness – a key UN Sustainable Development Goal. They are also about empowering women to strengthen agriculture’s response to climate and biodiversity pressures.

‘A lot of labour and drudgery falls to women simply because there are entrenched assumptions about their roles. They also don’t get asked what they need, such as tools or technologies that would specifically help them.

‘I once asked women farmers in Cambodia what they most wanted and they said “more free time”. This is a fundamental voice that research planners need to hear,’ said Dr de Haan.

ACIAR advocacy

The HER+ initiative is strongly supported by ACIAR, which is a leading advocate for the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform.

ACIAR understood the need to bring together all the expertise on gender in agriculture and food systems in one place, to ensure gender research is cutting edge. In 2021–22, ACIAR contributed A\$400,000 to HER+ and A\$740,000 to the gender platform.

This complemented the new One CGIAR research strategy that seeks a more systems-focused approach to research than the traditional commodity or location basis.

A holistic approach is seen as a more effective way to mitigate the impacts of climate change and other food production constraints that contribute to hunger, malnutrition and endemic poverty. And central to this is gender equity and social inclusion.

ACIAR Director, Multilateral Engagement, Dr Julianne Biddle, said the CGIAR GENDER Impact Platform and HER+ are at the forefront of leadership in gender-focused research in agriculture.

Dr Biddle is passionate about the need for lasting change and the potential impact that could come from creating more opportunities and participation for women and girls: ‘It could be the foundation stone to abolishing poverty.’

Long haul


However, both she and Dr de Haan are realistic about the long road ahead; gender equity is a complex matrix of culture, norms, values, race, religion, community and household influences and circumstances.

Dr Biddle said ACIAR research program managers work closely with the local staff in country offices. ‘We lean on their advice quite heavily to ensure inclusion strategies are appropriate in the context of what we are working on.’

Dr Biddle added that vigilance is required to maintain equity and inclusion because it is easy for research and researchers to be gender blind.

‘It’s easy to see biophysical activity in soils, for example, as not having any gender relevance, but follow that through to particular crops, livestock or practices and there will be gender consequences because of the different farm roles and aspirations men and women often have,’ said Dr Biddle.

‘So part of my job is to keep reminding people to keep up the level of awareness we have all worked hard to achieve.’

This is why both HER+ as a research initiative and the GENDER Impact Platform as an overarching support to research are considered crucial. Sustaining gender equity at both policy and community levels will need a strong body of evidence showing it achieves results that benefit everyone – that it strengthens the endeavour to eliminate endemic poverty and create vibrant communities. 

MORE INFORMATION: CGIAR Gender Equity Initiative, CGIAR Gender GENDER Impact Platform



CGIAR’s GENDER Impact Platform supports initiatives to help women achieve their aspirations in agriculture. Photo: C. Schubert, CGIAR

Key points

- 1 The world-first HER+ initiative puts gender equity at the forefront of agricultural development.
- 2 Increasing opportunity and participation for women and girls can create more vibrant communities.
- 3 Lasting change will require gender equity to be embedded in long-term systems, processes and governance.



Pest management targets the overlooked roles of women decision-makers

In South-East Asia new research is underway to identify the roles of women on farms and how best to engage them in integrated pest management programs.

Understanding women's roles and developing training programs and policies to better engage with women are vital to the success of farm extension programs on integrated pest and disease management (IPDM), according to Dr Alison Watson.

Dr Watson leads the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Fall Armyworm Action Plan. The fall armyworm is a highly destructive pest that has spread rapidly across South-East Asia over the past 5 years, causing significant damage to maize crops.

IPDM is central to the Action Plan, which involves all 10 ASEAN nations and is supported by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Secretariat is hosted by CSIRO.

But Dr Watson said the scope of the Action Plan is wider than fall armyworm and incorporates capacity building for improving plant health and biosecurity more broadly. This includes a Women as Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Leaders Program, which began in 2022.

'We want to identify the opportunities to empower women in plant pest and disease management, with a holistic approach to improving crop health, using pesticides as a last resort,' explained Dr Watson.

Partnerships

By partnering with other IPM research already underway, the Women as IPM Leaders Program has been able to quickly expand its scope beyond maize to other crop systems and increase its geographical footprint.

Among these partners are 2 ACIAR-supported projects. One is led by Dr Tony Pattison at the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (QDAF) working on the control of Fusarium wilt in bananas in Australia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia and the Philippines.

The second project, led by Mr Stefano De Faveri, also at QDAF, is focused on fruit-fly control in mango crops in Australia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Field surveys to identify the specific roles of women in the banana and mango farming systems began in April this year and data will be finalised by this August.

The Women as IPM Leaders Program is also building the skills of research and extension teams to actively consider the roles of women and how to engage with them, including their availability to attend training sessions.

'We often don't see or understand the different roles of women in agriculture, and they play such an important

More women mango farmers are engaging in training, pictured with ACIAR project team members at a recent workshop in Indonesia. Photo: DINAS





role,' said Dr Watson. 'Time and again we discover examples of women as key decision-makers in households and on farms.'

'When you design programs, if you want to drive long-term change, you need to know who is making decisions and then consider how to best craft communications and provide tools and training to reach those people.'

It is also important to ask the right questions, added Dr Watson. For example, asking who uses pesticides does not necessarily identify who is most exposed to pesticides or who makes important decisions around what is purchased and when to apply. Anecdotal evidence suggests it is often women in both cases.

Building research capacity

To help research project teams more proactively identify and engage with women in farming, a gender and agriculture workshop was held in Indonesia from 6–8 December 2022 as part of a joint Women as IPM Leaders Program and CGIAR Plant Health collaboration.

It brought together 50 participants from 8 countries to gain knowledge and skills in gender-responsive research design and methods and included team members from the Fusarium wilt and fruit-fly teams.

Dr Pattison said the gender training will ensure that the toolkit for farmers being developed for his Fusarium wilt project better considers the roles of women in banana crop management.

His research officer, Dr Juliet Zambrano from the Davao del Norte Provincial Government Agriculturist Office in



ACIAR Fusarium wilt project team members in Indonesia, from left, Dr Arif Wibowo (University of Gadjah Mada (UGM)), Ms Diana Lintanti, (Head of Banana Women Farmer's Group, Kartini, Maguwoharjo, Yogyakarta), Dr Tony Pattison (Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Queensland), Dr Siti Subandiyah (UGM) and Dr Alia Bihrajihant Raya (UGM). Photo: UGM

the Philippines, said through her participation in the Women as IPM Leaders Program, she has realised that the roles of women in agriculture are as noteworthy as those of men. 'Women are as enthusiastic and interested in farm work as men, despite women also doing household chores,' said Dr Zambrano.

As leader of the fruit-fly project in mango crops, Mr Stefano De Faveri said he has seen an increasing number of women attending workshops over the life of the project, and particularly since the recent gender training.

'Female farmers take the information provided seriously, they take safety seriously, and they go home and discuss it with their husbands,' said Mr De Faveri. 'I'm not sure that happens the other way around.'

His Indonesian research officer, Ms Nelly Saptia, reported that members of a women's farmer group who attended their first workshop in March were pleased to learn how to spray the trees better so they could tell their husbands to use more selective and efficient pesticides.

'They hope that the costs they incur for using pesticides can be reduced so that they can allocate [money] for other purposes needed in the household,' said Ms Saptia.

ACIAR PROJECT: 'An integrated management response to the spread of Fusarium wilt of banana in South-East Asia – Indonesia Phase' (HORT/2018/192); 'Development of area-wide management approaches for fruit flies in mango for Indonesia, Philippines, Australia and the Asia-Pacific region' (HORT/2018/192)

Key points

- 1 A new ASEAN initiative is identifying the roles of women in farming systems in South-East Asia as the first step in empowering women as leaders in integrated pest and disease management.
- 2 Surveys are being undertaken in conjunction with 2 ACIAR-supported projects to identify the role of women in banana and mango farming, and management of plant pests and diseases.
- 3 Training research and extension staff to apply a gender lens is helping them tailor training activities and resources, and engage with women more effectively.

Shared workloads improve lives in Solomon Islands

The wellbeing of a community of Solomon Islander families is improving following training designed by Australian social scientists in partnership with farming families in Papua New Guinea.

A successful training model developed in Papua Guinea (PNG) has been adapted and piloted in Solomon Islands to help farming families better share their workloads and resources.

The ACIAR-supported Family Farm Teams (FFT) project in PNG proved transformational, helping women and their families improve their lives.

The 5-year PNG project ended in 2018, and the new Solomon Islands project started in 2020. Early reports suggest the new program is equally transformational.

Program aims

Professor Barbara Pamphilon from the University of Canberra led the development of FFT, which aims to encourage more effective, sustainable and gender-equitable farming and business practices.

In PNG, women and girls provide 85% of the food production labour, but their contribution is often not acknowledged.

Although women farmers are key to the livelihoods of PNG families, most face limited access to productive resources, restricted mobility, unequal divisions of labour and low levels of schooling.

FFT provides training via 4 modules:

1. working as a family farm team for family goals
2. planning your family farm as a family team
3. feeding your family farm team
4. decision-making and communicating as a family farm team.

Trainers use experiential learning activities such as drawing and role-plays to facilitate understanding, reflection, planning and change.

They teach family pairs (often couples) to be Village Community Educators (VCEs) to equip others in their community. This way, women and men work together to support and guide changes in their family and community.

Additional PNG project outcomes

After the PNG project ended, Professor Pamphilon noted that as women applied skills and knowledge that helped their own families, they also helped others. This raised the women's self-esteem and community standing.

'Others saw the skills and the family progress, which elevated that woman and her family in the community,' said Professor Pamphilon.

'FFT's activities made visible the workloads of women and children and the need for effective, non-violent communication. This creates a family environment where women and girls can grow and develop. It enables gender cooperation and teamwork.'

Solomon Islands

Associate Professor Deborah Hill, also from the University of Canberra, said the success of FFT in PNG prompted the trial and adaptation of the program in the remote north-eastern Solomon Islands district of Longgu.

The work is part of the ACIAR-supported project 'Improving agricultural development opportunities for female smallholders in rural Solomon Islands', which Associate Professor Hill leads.



Family Farm Teams participants learning about plant pests. Photo: University of Canberra



Farmer Mrs Florence Velloa, a beneficiary of Family Farm Teams training, harvesting produce before a market day. Photo: ACIAR

Key points

- 1 Family Farm Teams, a training model encouraging shared workloads, has improved family wellbeing in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.
- 2 Participating family members have learned to share their work more equally and have improved communication, planning and goal-setting.
- 3 Outcomes include increased food production, higher quality nutrition, enhanced access to education for children and superior health.

While in some parts of Solomon Islands, including Guadalcanal, land passes from women to their children, men are often the primary decision-makers.

Important partnerships

Associate Professor Hill said that women from the Longgu district Mothers' Union were invited to participate in workshops, along with a male family member. While most women brought husbands, others invited fathers or nephews.

All participants were encouraged to commit to teaching 10 other people so the wider community would benefit. The modules aim to be inclusive by encouraging participants, especially women, to use their own language.

After the training, facilitators offer support as families implement their goals and pass on what they have learned.

Positive impacts

Associate Professor Hill said focus groups on FFT in the Longgu district reported that more families are growing their own food and eating what they grow rather than spending money on store-bought food.

'Children are no longer hungry, and there's more food to share and sell,' said one community member.

Solomon Islander farmer Mrs Florence Velloa participated in the program and said she had not realised she could call on her family to help her complete her daily work.

'After ... [the] training, our daily chores and activities became so much easier because we work together as a family,' said Mrs Velloa.

Live & Learn Environmental Education country manager Ms Elmah Panisi said when families work together, all members feel they have a right to the money. This leads to joint planning for the use of the shared resources.


Mrs Velloa said her family wanted to earn enough money to finish building their house, pay for their daughter's education and earn a living from other small businesses.

'I am very thankful for this project. All my life we have lived on a hand-to-mouth basis, with no concrete plans for our future, and today I am proud to be a farmer with my husband, and I can manage and save money. Our lives have greatly improved.'

Associate Professor Hill said 52 people had completed FFT in Longgu, and over 600 had learned about its messages through the VCEs.

'FFT will be delivered in another community this year,' said Associate Professor Hill.

Dr Todd Sanderson, ACIAR Research Program Manager, Social Systems, said the agency was a long-term supporter of FFT, first through Professor Pamphilon and her team and now through Associate Professor Hill and her collaborators.

'The work is an excellent example of how quality social science research is foundational to robust program design and delivery, which ultimately seeks to enhance human wellbeing,' said Dr Sanderson. 

ACIAR PROJECT: 'Improving agricultural development opportunities for female smallholders in rural Solomon Islands' (SSS/2018/136)



Incorporating Indigenous knowledge is crucial to creating regenerative agritourism standards in Vanuatu. Photo: ACIAR

Indigenous knowledge pioneers regenerative agritourism in Vanuatu

Vanuatu is providing global leadership in initiatives to build Indigenous knowledge systems into regenerative agritourism opportunities for its people.

Indigenous knowledge and leadership underpin a new approach to agritourism for the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, evolving from ACIAR-supported research to support business development in the region.

One recently completed project evaluated the need for a third-party verified voluntary sustainable certification program for key food commodities in Vanuatu.

And when the research team and project stakeholders discovered there was no existing certification standard that met their needs, they decided to create their own.

This has led to the launch of Regenerative Vanua as a not-for-profit third-party certification organisation, the drafting of world-first regenerative agritourism standards and development of a regenerative pathways program.



Defining Vanuatu's agritourism

All of this has emerged under the guidance of the Vanuatu Agritourism Association, which itself was formed as the result of the ACIAR-supported Pacific Agribusiness Research in Development Initiative (PARDI).

The PARDI project found that 'agritourism', as it was approached across the Pacific region, mostly benefited rural communities and farmers supplying food products to larger resorts and hotels; but it was actually more aligned to agribusiness or culinary tourism.

Less supported were farm businesses, which provide agricultural experiences for their local communities and tourists.

Chairman of the Vanuatu Agritourism Association Mr Benson Samuels said while agritourism has had a presence in Vanuatu for many years, when the association was first formed, members worked hard to define what agritourism meant to them.

'We came to the discovery that regenerative agritourism is a way forward for Indigenous people,' said Mr Samuels.

The development of the new regenerative agritourism standard and certification now provides a guide to advance local enterprises. It takes its core definition of agritourism as 'visiting a farm for an educational and immersive learning experience and building connection to people, places and products'.

Closely interwoven with this are the Indigenous knowledge systems of the country's agritourism operators, which form part of the agritourism experiences they provide.

Regenerative Vanua

Dr Cherise Addinsall, an adjunct fellow at Southern Cross University, University of the Sunshine Coast and member of the Pacific Centre for International Agricultural Research, has led the sustainability certification project for ACIAR.

'While there are many organisations offering third-party certification for sustainable agriculture and tourism, there was an issue of accessibility when it came to auditing,' said Dr Addinsall. 'The process is also too expensive for many Indigenous rural smallholders and tourism businesses.'

As a result, Regenerative Vanua was formed as an Indigenous-led, not-for-profit third-party certification organisation to support the diversification of local agribusinesses and Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu people into agritourism ventures.

It does this by helping them to apply regenerative concepts to business developments based on their Indigenous knowledge systems, land sovereignty and protecting and promoting traditional and cultural knowledge.

Dr Addinsall said through third-party verification, Regenerative Vanua will ensure that Vanuatu's regenerative agritourism operators meet core sustainability criteria set out by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, and additional standards in regenerative agriculture. The aim is to ensure agritourism operators cause no impact to their landscapes or communities.

'We also have a regenerative recognition pathway program that acknowledges agritourism operators that are on a regenerative pathway. We do not audit this as we believe a regenerative pathway is constantly evolving. However, we acknowledge when an operator is authentically following a regenerative journey,' added Dr Addinsall.

Ms Laurana Rakau-Tokataake, operations manager for Regenerative Vanua, said that as a non-government organisation, Regenerative Vanua acts as a bridge between agritourism operators, communities and the relevant government agencies seeking to support resilient, diversified and regenerative rural development.

'Regenerative goes further than "sustainable" because it ensures the diversity, quality of production, vitality and health of the soil, plants, animals and people improve together.

'It's not about minimising damage of income earning activities, it's about building on our traditional knowledge to improve the wellbeing of our people, communities, the land and ecosystems,' said Ms Rakau-Tokataake.

Key points

- 1 An ACIAR-supported research project has evaluated the need for a third-party certification program for key commodities in Vanuatu.
- 2 The project has incorporated Indigenous knowledge, drafting the world's first regenerative agritourism standards and a regenerative pathway recognition program.
- 3 Regenerative Vanua was established as a non-government organisation that can act as a bridge between agritourism operators, communities and government agencies to support agritourism development.



Indigenous knowledge and traditional farming

As an expert in traditional agriculture and an organics auditor, Ms Norah Rihai has been a participant in the project and highlights the value of this approach in supporting traditional farming practices and foods.

‘The exciting thing about regenerative principles is that it is based on Indigenous knowledge systems,’ said Ms Rihai. ‘Research is showing as agriculture globally is struggling with the impacts of climate change, it is our traditional knowledge that is being applied as a mechanism to adapt to these impacts.’

Ms Rihai believes regenerative agritourism standards will also help businesses and communities to better appreciate and promote traditional foods. ‘Like any of the Pacific countries, food is very important to the culture of Vanuatu. Our food is unique to us, we need to be proud of that and take ownership of that.’

Ms Votausi Mackenzie-Reur, the director of Lapita Café and the Vanuatu-based leader for the certification project, emphasised the central role of Indigenous people in the work.

‘We are facing a global crisis in regard to climate change,’ explained Ms Mackenzie-Reur. ‘I think it is really important that we as Indigenous people take the leading role in getting people to revisit what we have.’

‘Our population continues to increase, and we have limited land space, but through our research, we found that with Indigenous knowledge systems a small piece of land can sustain one tribe for centuries. So, this is something that we want to continue to explore and promote amongst our young people, and see reflected in our government’s sustainable policies,’ said Ms Mackenzie-Reur.



Ms Votausi Mackenzie-Reur is the director of Lapita Café, a local business that uses traditional Ni-Vanuatu produce. Photo: ACIAR

Importance of certification

Mr Jerry Spooner, executive director of Regenerative Vanua, said the organisation is working with the Vanuatu Bureau of Standards to facilitate training of independent auditors, then putting forward recommendations for certification.

‘Our approach now is to highlight the importance of third-party certification to ensure that our regenerative agritourism operators are developing businesses that do not impact on our environment while supporting climate resilience,’ said Mr Spooner.

‘We are starting to demonstrate that these standards developed by our Indigenous people promote quality, consistency and credibility in the use of our Indigenous knowledge systems.’

‘... Through our research, we found that with Indigenous knowledge systems a small piece of land can sustain one tribe for centuries.’

Ms Ruth Amos, CEO of the Vanuatu Bureau of Standards, said the Vanuatu Agritourism Association had played an important role in empowering local operators and providing a voice on how the sector should be developed and the policy and resource support needed.


‘The Vanuatu Bureau of Standards has been supporting Regenerative

Vanua in developing regenerative agritourism standards and will continue to, as a priority for our organisation,’ said Ms Amos.

Dr Anna Okello, ACIAR Research Program Manager, Livestock, said that the project is about levelling the playing field for smallholder farmers. ‘This project was born out of a need to add value to non-commodity outputs like sustainable farming systems and agritourism.’

‘Prior to COVID-19, about 50% of Vanuatu’s GDP came from tourism. So, moving forward, they want to enrich regenerative agriculture and sustainable tourism, and to do this you need an independent framework for certifying products as sustainable.’

These standards have been submitted to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and on completion of a verification workshop in April, the ACIAR-supported project is winding up.

Regenerative Vanua will now be overseeing the third-party verification of regenerative agritourism in Vanuatu and the regenerative agritourism pathway and experiential learning program. 

ACIAR PROJECT: ‘Development of a third party verified voluntary sustainable certification program for beef and other key commodities in Vanuatu’ (LS/2020/155)



Participants at the start of the Regional Agriculture and Forestry Symposium 2023. Photo: ACIAR

ACIAR attends the Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry

As leaders from across the Pacific region met to discuss the future of agriculture and forestry in the region, ACIAR-supported forums helped drive locally led discussion to shape development priorities.

ACIAR had strong representation at the Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry in Nadi, Fiji, which saw ministers and heads of agriculture and forestry departments from 21 Pacific island nations meet under the common theme of *Transforming Pacific Agriculture and Forestry*.

The week provided an opportunity for Pacific island countries to drive the conversation and provide guidance to partners working with the region on their goals and work priorities for the next 2 years.

Senior ACIAR staff engaged with Pacific leaders to discuss key development issues and identify opportunities for Australian expertise to contribute to future research priorities.


For 40 years, ACIAR has supported and connected Australian researchers with their Pacific region counterparts, helping to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods in agriculture, forestry and fisheries in the Pacific region.

Currently, ACIAR is investing more than A\$18.6 million across 8 Pacific island countries.

During the activities at the Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry, ACIAR sponsored the Fijian Institute of Agricultural Science to lead a research symposium to identify how science and innovation could bolster food security.

The institute worked with The Pacific Community (SPC) to run a *talanoa* (a talk or discussion in Fijian) on Pacific food system pathways focusing on future research initiatives required to underpin broader transformation of Pacific agrifood systems.

The convening power of Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry also enabled ACIAR to engage with its research partners, host a networking opportunity for Pacific alumni and take part in a range of side events with key partners.

Tonga will play host to the next Pacific Week of Agriculture and Forestry, scheduled for 2025. 

Women's fellowship supports emerging leaders

For Dr Seesei Molimau-Samasoni, taking part in the Meryl Williams Fellowship has brought new insights and connections that will help drive her leadership around increasing nutrition and reducing food loss in the Pacific region.

Dr Seesei Molimau-Samasoni hesitated when she was first approached to apply for the Meryl Williams Fellowship – a leadership and management program to support female agricultural researchers in the Indo-Pacific region.

As manager for the Plants & Postharvest Technologies Division at the Scientific Research Organisation of Samoa (SROS), she already had a full plate, leading several projects aimed at improving food security and people's health.

Plus, she was sceptical about whether leadership could be taught. 'I was wondering, "how are people going to teach me to be a leader?";' remembered Dr Molimau-Samasoni. 'I thought being a leader was just something that you learnt along the way, as you experienced it.'

Today, as she approaches the end of the fellowship program, she is pleased to stand corrected. Dr Molimau-Samasoni said the insights she has gained through workshops and the people she has met, have helped to make her a better leader, improving work relationships and outputs.

'In fact, I wish I had the opportunity to do a program like this a lot earlier in my career. It showed me some wonderful things that have enabled me to be a much more effective leader in my organisation.'

Bringing women together

As the major breadwinner in her family and one of 4 women occupying 6 management positions at SROS (where 48% of scientists are female), Dr Molimau-Samasoni and her organisation are bucking convention.

Despite these advances, Dr Molimau-Samasoni said being a female leader in the Pacific region can still feel 'very isolating'.

And this is where the fellowship has provided great value. 'You tend to think that you're in this leadership space by yourself, but this program has brought like-minded women together to inspire each other and also support each other when things become challenging, which is really important,' explained Dr Molimau-Samasoni.

Meeting in-person for workshops in Australia as part of the fellowship helped cement those ties.

For Dr Molimau-Samasoni, learning about different types of leadership personality traits – including her own – was particularly eye-opening. By learning how to align her leadership style with the individual needs of her team, whether it be providing close supervision or staying at arm's length, she can help them to thrive, she said, and ultimately achieve better results for the community.

Professional development

Dr Molimau-Samasoni moved her original work in drug discovery to agricultural research when an ACIAR-supported research opportunity arose at SROS, and she is very passionate about the applied nature of her work.

Her projects include expanding crop production windows and reducing losses post-harvest through refined food handling systems, with the larger aims of increasing nutrition and improving people's livelihoods and wellbeing.

Key points

- 1 The Meryl Williams Fellowship brings emerging women leaders together from around the Indo-Pacific region to build networks and management skills.
- 2 Fellows are paired with a mentor from their home country and supported to implement a professional development plan.
- 3 Samoan Fellow Dr Seesei Molimau-Samasoni has gained insights into more effective leadership that will help advance her research around food security and public health.



The Meryl Williams Fellowship

Funded by ACIAR and named after the eminent Australian fisheries and aquaculture agricultural research leader, the Meryl Williams Fellowship was developed specifically for emerging female leaders in the Indo-Pacific region to overcome barriers to their participation and advancement in agricultural research.

Established in 2020, the fellowship has brought together 41 women from 15 countries. It pairs them with a local mentor and involves intensive leadership workshops. Participation extends over 15 months during which fellows developed personalised professional development plans, often involving regional collaboration. The program is delivered in partnership with the University of New England.

‘Noncommunicable diseases related to obesity are a real problem here in the Pacific, so we’re trying to approach that from a nutrition perspective, by expanding the fruit availability window so that consumers have a longer period of time where they’re able to access local citrus fruit for better health outcomes,’ said Dr Molimau-Samasoni.

‘We also have projects diversifying the types of produce that our farmers have access to so that they’re able to supply more food here in the Pacific.’

In research jointly funded by ACIAR and Canada’s International Development Research Centre, Dr Molimau-Samasoni is also leading a project to limit losses along horticultural supply chains in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Tonga.

Dr Molimau-Samasoni discussing leadership ideas at the first intensive workshop of Cohort 2’s MWF program in Armidale, Australia. Photo: University of New England

She said a work placement at ACIAR as part of her fellowship has strengthened her relationship with Australia. And the benefits flow both ways.

For example, she showcased her organisation and her abilities as a leader, while also providing insights for ACIAR on Pacific government research priorities – advancing prospects for future collaboration.

Value of mentoring

Growing up in a Samoan family full of influential women, Dr Molimau-Samasoni said she had a blind spot around many of the gender-based difficulties faced by her peers.

The fellowship, she said, has helped her to understand the experience of other women in the Indo-Pacific region – and key in this has been her ‘larger than life’ mentor, Dr Fetaomi Tapu-Qiliho.

‘She opened up my eyes in terms of the challenges that less fortunate women are going through,’ she said. ‘At the same time, she’s been really fantastic in encouraging me around my own leadership challenges, including finding my voice in meetings dominated by men.’ 🌱

MORE INFORMATION: Meryl Williams Fellowship: aciar.gov.au/fellowships/meryl-williams-fellowship



Commission Chair Mrs Fiona Simson (right), spoke with a group of women farmers in a field in Bangladesh. Photo: ACIAR



Participants in the climate-smart dialogue. Photo: FANRPAN

Australia’s Commission visits Bangladesh

Australia’s Commission for International Agricultural Research (the Commission) visited Bangladesh in February to learn about the country’s agricultural development priorities and to gain an understanding of the impact and effectiveness of 25 years of ACIAR collaboration with Bangladesh.

The Commission reviewed research partnerships, particularly those related to cropping under adverse conditions, including salinity and nutrient management. The Commission comprises 7 leading experts from Australia who provide advice on international agricultural research and development issues to Australia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs. 🌱

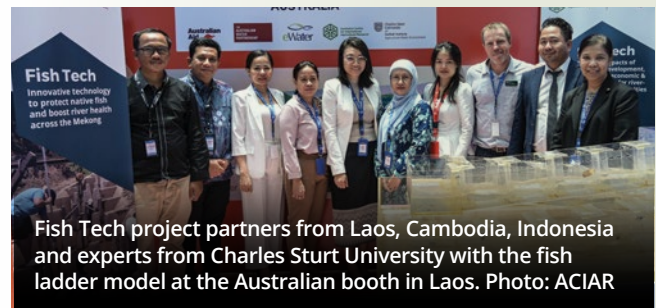
Transitioning to climate-resilient farming systems in Sub-Saharan Africa

ACIAR supported the Regional Climate Smart Agriculture Policy Dialogue held at the University of Pretoria’s Future Africa Campus, South Africa, in March.

ACIAR Research Program Manager, Water, Dr Neil Lazarow, and ACIAR Regional Manager for Eastern and Southern Africa, Dr Leah Ndungu presented at the 3-day workshop. The event brought together researchers and practitioners from across Sub-Saharan Africa to support climate-smart farming and provide evidence to inform key government and multilateral climate change programs. 🌱



Business, research and policymaking representatives at a hybrid forum focused on ensuring research activities have practical outcomes. Photo: ACIAR



Fish Tech project partners from Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and experts from Charles Sturt University with the fish ladder model at the Australian booth in Laos. Photo: ACIAR

Agribusinesses, researchers and policymakers come together in Vietnam

The ACIAR-led Agribusiness Reference Group (ARG) in Vietnam recently coordinated 2 seminars with partners from Vietnam’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Hanoi. The forums focused on digital traceability of agricultural products and the circular economy in the livestock sector. The forums attracted close to 600 participants.

The ARG brought together agribusinesses, researchers and policymakers to discuss emerging issues that can create sustainable change in different agriculture sectors and contribute to Vietnam’s economic development as well as global challenges such as climate change, pollution, and health and nutrition. 🌱

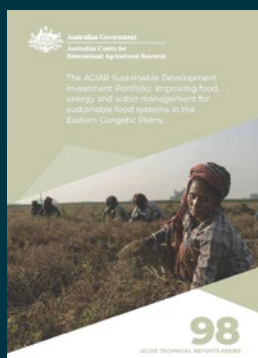
Australian innovation on display at Mekong River summit

A fish passage technology to protect fish populations in the Lower Mekong Basin, developed by Charles Sturt University through ACIAR-supported research, was the main feature at the Australian booth during the 4th Mekong River Commission Summit in Laos in April.

In partnership with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ACIAR is now funding efforts to scale-out the innovation across the Mekong region. The Mekong River Commission Summit brought together more than 800 participants, with researchers, policymakers and political leaders discussing the prevailing challenges and opportunities facing the Mekong Basin. 🌱

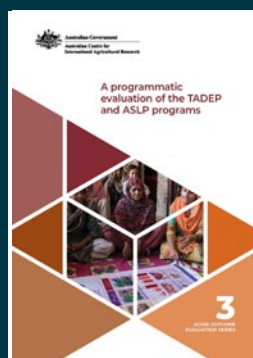
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The ACIAR Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio: Improving food, energy and water management for sustainable food systems in the Eastern Gangetic Plains

This is a technical report on the ACIAR Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP) program. SDIP was a suite of projects designed to improve the management of water, energy and food resources in the Eastern Gangetic Plain, focused on sustainable food systems as a way of integrating different sectors at a range of scales, and ensuring gender-inclusive planning processes and outcomes.



A programmatic evaluation of the TADEP and ASLP programs

This report synthesises findings from evaluations of 2 ACIAR programs – the Transformative Agriculture and Enterprise Development Program (TADEP) and the Agriculture Sector Linkages Program (ASLP). It identifies lessons that can inform future ACIAR programs. It also draws on a light-touch review of the ACIAR Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP).

All ACIAR publications are free to download at aciarc.gov.au





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The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is part of Australia's international development cooperation program. Its mission is to achieve more productive and sustainable agricultural systems for the benefit of developing countries and Australia. ACIAR commissions collaborative research between Australian and developing-country researchers in areas where Australia has special research competence. ACIAR also administers Australia's contribution to the international agricultural research centres.