



Australian Government  
Australian Centre for  
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## PAST LESSONS A WELLSPRING OF OPTIMISM

Dr Meryl Williams reflects on her experiences in development aid, casting new light on the influence of gender divisions on project planning

BY GIO BRAIDOTTI

The former director general of the WorldFish Center, Dr Meryl Williams, is sitting onboard a vessel docked in north Queensland as she talks about the ongoing need for agricultural development programs and her own involvement in putting gender issues on the global R&D program.

Now semi-retired, the zoologist and statistician has taken on a number of non-executive roles that call on her long and varied experience in fisheries, aquaculture, agriculture, forestry and gender. These include chair of the ACIAR Commission, a role that sees her advising Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance on agricultural aid to developing countries.

The Commission replaces the ACIAR Board of Management and was established as part of changes to ACIAR's governance arrangements, made in 2007, and takes over from the Board of Management. No changes have been made to the Policy Advisory Council's role. The Commission is responsible for providing advice to the Minister in relation to ACIAR's programs and its membership includes The Hon. Neil Andrew, Mr Barry Buffier, Mr Peter Core, Mr David Crombie, Mr Bruce Davis and Dr John Williams.

Dr Williams is excited by her new role, describing ACIAR as "unique" and much

admired around the world: "From its inception it has been incredibly dedicated, on track and very well placed," she says. "John Crawford, one of the founding fathers of CGIAR, really had a terrific vision in persuading the Australian Government to establish an agency like ACIAR for Australia."

Intermittently, her answers during the interview are interrupted as the vessel's radio broadcasts turbulent news on Queensland's weather front. It is January 2008 and the Queensland coast is being battered by ferocious storms that are approaching her mooring site. However, as a marine scientist, Dr Williams is well accustomed to weathering storms, real and metaphorical.

"It is hard enough farming anywhere in the world at the best of times," she says. "But doing it with the population needs we have, the political problems in various parts of the world, climate change, and the added stress of new demands for biofuels ... well, it is a very challenging era."

She nonetheless exudes a sense of measured optimism and excitement. We are at the point, she says, where lessons learned in the past are about to come together in important ways: "After many decades, development assistance has come a long way. We've learnt by trial and error as well as by following new ideas. There is no simple recipe—and that is probably

Dr Meryl Williams (third from left) pictured with fellow members of the ACIAR Commission and the Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance, the Hon. Bob McMullan (fourth from left). The Commissioners are (from left) Peter Core, Barry Buffier, Dr John Williams, the Hon. Neil Andrew, David Crombie and Bruce Davis.

one of the big lessons. You cannot just go into a community, add the technology, and suddenly be on the path to development."

For researchers, this means being involved at the outset with the goal of gathering insights and a mutual understanding of the context surrounding the intended development. It means appreciating the local culture and its often unique social, economic and environmental circumstances, coupled with what the people want and need, and their assets, strengths and opportunities.

Dr Williams describes ACIAR as being 'pre-adapted' for the modern approach to development aid because it has built everything on a partnership approach and tripartite arrangements. "ACIAR provides funds plus program and development expertise. The overseas partner brings knowledge, priorities, resources and needs, while the Australian research partner provides scientific skills, contacts and desire to work overseas. There is long-term

commitment to the relationship and this makes for a powerful approach.”

Dr Williams makes these observations after a remarkable career that reached the upper echelons of international agricultural R&D. The journey started in Queensland where she did her doctorate on commercial crab species in the 1970s.

“I was part of a wave of people in the late 1960s who started to become more aware of marine science,” Dr Williams says. “It was a growing field at the time, with interest driven by the crown of thorns starfish outbreak and the fight over drilling for oil in the Great Barrier Reef. These issues made people realise they knew little about what happens beyond Australia’s coastline.”

At the same time commercial fisheries were starting to expand, providing an upswing in jobs for the newly-trained marine biologists. She started her first fisheries job in 1977 at the Queensland Fishery Service and recalls being only the second woman biologist they had ever hired.

Her career trajectory from there is remarkable. The mid 1980s saw stints at the South Pacific Commission and the Australian Department of Primary Industries and Energy where, by 1990, she became executive director of the Bureau of Rural Resources and went on to head the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences in Townsville. Then for a decade, from 1994, she was Director General of the WorldFish Center, one of the 15 centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) charged with alleviating poverty, improving nutrition and reducing pressure on the environment.

It was during this period that Dr Williams was approached to provide the opening address at the Women in Fisheries Conference. It was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1996 and amounted to her first involvement championing research on development and women. The topic would prove to have an enduring hold on the scientist and, to this day, Dr Williams continues to help researchers around the world explore the gender dimension of development programs.

“In the beginning, I had to do a quick crash course on where social science research was at with regards to women in fisheries and aquaculture, especially for the

Lower Mekong Basin countries—Thailand, Cambodia Vietnam and Laos,” she says.

What she learnt proved both interesting and compelling in terms of research priorities. Huge shifts in demographics came to light as a result of the region’s wars, with a higher proportion of women in the population and heading families. In post-conflict Cambodia, Dr Williams recalls women making up 65% of the adult population in some districts. Yet there was no corresponding shift in the way development action was structured. More generally, women’s participation in rural economies was frequently found to be unexamined and invisible, creating the potential for a gender bias in development efforts. “Fishing and aquaculture communities were the worst off in this regard,” says Dr Williams.

“When you talk about fisheries, everybody has always seen it as quite a ‘macho’ occupation. It is the men that fish or dig the aquaculture pond. So a lot of the fisheries development work concentrated just on the production side, with most training courses intended for men.”

Yet when gender researchers looked, women were seen working in the pre-catch and the postharvest service sectors, making and mending fishing nets, maintaining the gear, processing the fish and, in many countries, playing a major role in marketing. Fisheries drove home the message that, if you are going to help women, then you need to look right along the supply chains.

“When you start to look at gender issues you do start to discover different things about the fishery sector that require attention in the development sense. We were quite excited about the kinds of impacts we could have.”

By 2001, enough lessons had been learned for the focus to expand to gender issues more generally, not just women. The relationships between women, men and children were examined at two global symposia on gender and fisheries, held in 2004 and 2007, that saw fisheries take the lead in gender issues. One “shock discovery” found higher rates of HIV/AIDS infection in fishing communities compared to the general population right across developing countries. That finding resulted in Uganda mounting AIDS prevention programs specifically designed for fishing

communities and these have since been adopted by all countries surrounding Lake Victoria.

Along the way, Dr Williams has witnessed a turnaround in attitudes, both to the issues themselves and to her own participation with gender research.

“In our first Asian Fishery Forum symposium in 1998, we were the butt of so many jokes. All the men knew us as straight researchers with no connection to the ‘gender stuff’. We even had to stress in our first press release that women do, in fact, fish. Now people do not joke about this anymore. In fact they are more prone to stress how much gender-related activity they have done either in their mainstream job or alongside it.”

This year, in another breakthrough, the mainstream journal *Development*, will publish a special selection of gender and fisheries papers based on the November 2007 Asian Fisheries Society special symposium.

After retiring from the WorldFish Center, Dr Williams spent 18 months engaged in work that endows her with a special insight into agricultural R&D. She spent 18 months liaising among all 15 CGIAR centres, helping them create a formal alliance that can contribute towards CGIAR’s strategy and direction. Given the centres perform research across all sectors—crops, livestock, fisheries, forestry, water—she has a broad grasp of the issues, interactions and co-dependencies in the R&D needs associated with rural development. It was halfway through this CGIAR position that Australia recruited her to chair the ACIAR Board, and more recently the Commission.

It is an exciting time for Australian aid, she says. ACIAR, as the specialist agricultural, forestry and fishery R&D agency, is increasingly being integrated in Australia’s overall aid program. Beyond national boundaries, partnerships are expanding to include other international agencies, including non-government bodies, such as World Vision, that can build on the core scientific projects undertaken by ACIAR. Combined with internal changes, there is a new wave of bigger projects in the pipeline, Dr Williams says, that deliberately integrate plant, water, forestry, fishery and agricultural components to deliver more holistic and multi-disciplinary programs for all partner participants. ■