

RESEARCH A FAMILY PASSION

Dr Luis Rey Velasco's affinity with the University of the Philippines, Los Baños, dates back decades. The newly appointed chancellor is entering a new chapter in this history, with the hope that hard work and focus will see his research dreams turn into reality

BY REBECCA THYER

Dr Luis Rey Velasco's passion for agricultural research and the University of the Philippines (UP) started long before he became the university's Los Baños chancellor, or even undertook his undergraduate degree there.

During his childhood, Dr Velasco spent a lot of time at the university with his father, Dr Jose R. Velasco, a former professor emeritus in

plant physiology. Dr Velasco credits his father as being a major influence on his academic choices and where they have taken him.

The professor of entomology, who was sworn in as chancellor of the Los Baños campus in 2006, says his new role is a privilege as well as a great challenge.

"It is an honour to contribute to an institution that has touched, even in a small way, the lives of many great men and women who have crafted, and who will craft, the destiny of science and development in my country," he says. "But it is also a challenge because your colleagues demand and expect the best of the chancellor, nothing less."

Dr Velasco expects to invest time and energy in both of his roles as an agricultural researcher and chancellor, saying he is excited by the potential to contribute to scientific knowledge and the chance he has been given to be a part of the education of young men and women.

The Los Baños campus specialises in agricultural, forestry and rural development research, areas crucial to improving the lives of millions of people in the Philippines. "In a country where more than 50 per cent of the population is engaged in farming for their livelihood and most suffer varying degrees of poverty, agriculture and agricultural research is obviously of critical importance," Dr Velasco says.

For farming families, agricultural research and development (R&D) needs to address two crucial issues, he says. It has to help provide a reliable food source, and it has to generate a decent income. "The ultimate goal of agricultural R&D is to improve farmers' economic standing and quality of life, but it must also ensure that the interests of future farmers are not compromised."

In a wider context, Dr Velasco says there is a distinct challenge in balancing immediate needs with longer-term structural requirements. "On one hand there is a need to address food security for political stability. Then on the other hand we need to ensure our farmers can compete in a global free-trade economy, for local agriculture to become a viable industry."

This creates competing demands for agricultural R&D, especially when the supply and quality of resources is deteriorating.

As a researcher and as an educator, Dr Velasco is at the sharp end of the question—how to produce more food

when there is a diminishing land area, an increasing population and the effects of global warming are unknown.

These are quite possibly the easy questions, compared with problems such as these: "How do we make agricultural products more affordable as well as provide a decent income for farm families? And how do we address the economic and political barriers of food sharing in the face of massive hunger and poverty?"

Dr Velasco acknowledges that value-added agricultural products, high-value crops and crop diversification offer potential, but these raise economic issues that have to be thought through carefully. "Who will take the risk and fund value-added infrastructure? Can farmers afford high-risk crops if returns are not immediate?"

For him, the challenge is to develop new economic paradigms that address such problems and keep farmers on the farm. Incentives and subsidies have to be provided to allow farmers to be responsible in the face of deteriorating land and water resources, and to eliminate practices that harm community and environmental health.

To this end, he says, ACIAR has helped to broaden the region's agricultural R&D focus by encouraging new ways of thinking: "To my mind, ACIAR's most important contribution is bringing new paradigms and thinking to agriculture and rural development in my country and the region."

Dr Velasco, who likens his chancellor role to that of a CEO—providing leadership, crafting a vision and setting goals—says his personal approach and hope for achieving goals is to seek to transform dreams into reality. "My philosophy is very simple—be an optimist, dream, focus and work hard," he says. "And if you still fail, that is good, because the second time around you will be better prepared." ■

