

# RESEARCH GROWS FROM THE SEEDS OF FELLOWSHIP

Providing postgraduate opportunities to people living outside Australia has seen research knowledge spread and thrive across the developing world.



ACIAR John Allwright Fellow Dr Bhagirath Singh Chauhan (left), pictured with colleagues from the International Rice Research Institute, is investigating the effect of flooding depth and duration on rice and weed emergence and growth.

## KEY POINTS:

- **ACIAR has a strong commitment to helping partner countries build their R&D capacity.**
- **Improved capacity ensures ongoing services to farmers seeking to innovate production, marketing and retail systems.**
- **In addition to running farmer field and business schools, ACIAR offers training within Australia through the John Dillon and John Allwright Fellowships.**
- **Strong diplomatic bonds have been forged as a result of relationships built through ACIAR's capacity-building initiatives.**

## BY PENNY FANNIN

**A**lthough born into a middle-class family and raised in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, Dr El Sotheary is acutely aware of the challenges facing many of the country's farmers.

As the deputy head of the Cambodian Agricultural Research and Development Institute's (CARDI) socioeconomics division, Dr Sotheary seeks to understand the social and economic circumstances that prevent farmers from adopting improved technologies and production practices.

Her position has other responsibilities, but they all come down to making life better for the 8.3 million Cambodians the World Bank estimates rely on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Dr Sotheary joined CARDI in 2000. She had a background in business administration and embraced the move into the agricultural sector.

"Living in a country where agriculture is the leading sector of the country's economy, I have always been enthusiastic to work as an agricultural socioeconomist with the ultimate goal of helping to improve the living conditions

of Cambodian farmers who have suffered in poverty for decades," Dr Sotheary says.

In the early 2000s Dr Sotheary, keen to move into a senior position at CARDI, applied to ACIAR for a John Allwright Fellowship (JAF). The fellowship took her to the University of Queensland (UQ) where, in 2009, she completed a PhD through the School of Natural and Rural Systems Management (now the School of Integrative Systems). Dr Sotheary says she regularly applies the knowledge and skills she gained to her work at CARDI.

This is largely why, in 1986, ACIAR established the JAF scheme. Through the scheme ACIAR is building the capacity of agricultural research institutions in partner countries.

The program benefits research capacity in ACIAR's partner-country institutions, linking their scientists to Australian scientists. This approach has been proven to ensure development and research outcomes are more sustainable.

ACIAR, with co-funding from AusAID, provided 138 John Allwright Fellowships in 2010–11 to allow researchers from partner countries who are actively involved in ACIAR projects to undertake postgraduate studies at Australian universities. 154 people had obtained Masters or PhD qualifications.

A survey in 2008 of JAF alumni showed the aims of the fellowship scheme were being met. Major findings were:

- A high (74%) return rate of fellows to their home country following completion of studies, maximising the opportunities for capacity building to occur within alumni home-country institutes.
- Almost all (99%) fellows indicated that they were facilitating the transfer of

knowledge and skills within their institute or current workplace.

- The majority (93%) of institute directors and fellows agreed that the skills and knowledge acquired during postgraduate studies were highly relevant to their current positions.
- The majority (81%) of fellows have been promoted since returning to their home country, with directors (78%) and fellows (85%) agreeing that the promotion was directly attributed to successful completion of postgraduate qualifications.
- Almost all (95%) fellows indicated that the fellowship was a positive experience, with both fellows and directors identifying research and writing skills, increased flexibility and openness to new ideas, and the network of professional contacts as major benefits resulting from participation in the scheme.

Dr Sotheary is representative of all these findings. "Most of the knowledge and skills I gained from my postgraduate degree in Australia are now regularly applied in my work at CARDI," she says. "For example, I've developed a research project on the adoption and impact of CARDI's released rice varieties 'Phka Rumduol' and 'Sen Pidao'."

The project has been funded by the Cambodian Agricultural Research Fund and aims to understand why some of CARDI's released rice varieties are well known among some farmers but unfamiliar to others. "Although CARDI has released 32 rice varieties to suit rainfed lowland and dry-season conditions, not all of them are well adopted," Dr Sotheary says. "So, in order to understand the current level of adoption of both rice varieties and how the adoption can be increased in the future, I am using a research tool that I used in my PhD."

Dr Sotheary is also involved in two ACIAR research projects. One is seeking to enhance the



ACIAR John Allwright Fellow Dr El Sotheary (second from right), facilitates a workshop for agricultural extension staff and farmers at CARE Pailin, Cambodia.

adoption in Cambodia of improved technologies and practices for the production of upland crops such as maize and soybean. The other is focused on improving vegetable production and postharvest management systems.

Across the South China Sea another John Allwright Fellow, Dr Bhagirath Singh Chauhan, is also seeking to improve the livelihoods of people living below the poverty line.

His fellowship took him out of one ACIAR partner country—India—and led to him taking up a postdoctoral position in another—the Philippines—although his research has significance for the entire region. Dr Chauhan is now based at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), where he is studying the ecology and management of rice weeds. He left his native India to take up his John Allwright Fellowship at the University of Adelaide, where he completed a PhD in weed science in 2006.

“My PhD work was on weed ecology and here at IRRI I am engaged in similar work,” he says. “The knowledge I gained in weed ecology in Australia is helping me to develop new ideas on the ecology of rice weeds. I pass on this knowledge to my staff very often and train them also.”

This transfer of knowledge ensures the JAF scheme has reached beyond the people who are awarded the fellowships.

The long-term benefits of providing postgraduate scholarships through the JAF scheme to partners from developing countries is highlighted by the number who are now playing key roles and passing on their valuable knowledge and skills.

One John Allwright Fellow who has been disseminating knowledge to not only her home country of the Philippines but also throughout East Africa and Vietnam is Dr Delia Catacutan.

When in the Philippines, Dr Catacutan, a

World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) research manager, works from her home town of Lantapan in a remote area of the north-central region of Mindanao. For the moment, though, she is living in the United States, having been awarded the Giorgio Ruffolo postdoctoral fellowship by Harvard University, where she is researching the links between knowledge generation and policy practice.

“Before coming to Harvard, I was a collaborating scientist on the ACIAR-funded Landcare project in the Philippines,” Dr Catacutan says. “At the same time, I was leading the AusAID-funded Landcare project in East Africa.”

She took up the latter position after completing a PhD at UQ in 2005, supported by an ACIAR John Allwright Fellowship. In her research, she developed criteria for selecting the best sites for promoting Landcare in the Philippines.

Dr Catacutan’s study did not stop with her PhD. Also awarded a six-week ACIAR John Dillon Fellowship, she bolstered her management and leadership skills and built closer links with Australian research agencies, including CSIRO, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, and UQ.

Immediately after completing both fellowships Dr Catacutan took on a broader role at ICRAF, which included leading a team of African researchers for the Landcare project in East Africa.

“Both the research and management skills I acquired from the John Allwright and John Dillon fellowships prepared me for this expanded role,” she says. “I remain grateful to ACIAR, especially to the people behind the fellowships. It has helped and changed so many lives positively. I hope it will have more resources to support more researchers in the developing world.” ■

## Fellowships support knowledge generation

Australia has invested in training to build the capacity of developing countries since the 1950s, when it was one of seven nations that established the Colombo Plan. The plan aims to strengthen the economic and social development of member countries, including many in the Asia-Pacific region, through collective inter-governmental efforts.

A key component of the plan, which today involves 26 nations, is training and capacity building. The Australian Government also supports training directly through the overseas aid program to increase access to and the quality of education and training for people in partner countries.

Since 1986 ACIAR has offered opportunities to young agricultural scientists from developing countries for postgraduate training at Australian universities. This began with the John Allwright Fellowships (JAF), which are awarded to partner-country scientists involved in ACIAR-supported collaborative research projects. Training undertaken is usually at the masters or doctoral level. The studies add value to the topic or theme of the ACIAR project in which the fellow is engaged, but do not directly form part of the project. Fellows spend up to 50% of their project period on fieldwork in their home country.

A second ACIAR fellowship scheme targets emerging leaders in agricultural research. John Dillon Fellowships provide a career-development opportunity in Australia for outstanding mid-career agricultural scientists and economists from ACIAR partner countries. They aim to develop leadership skills in agricultural research management, agricultural policy and/or extension technologies through exposure to a range of best-practice Australian agricultural organisations involved in research, extension and/or policy-making.

### PARTNER COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE

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