

THE MESSENGER

It is not just agricultural practice that is innovated by research at international centres; the means to communicate those findings also require innovation and leadership

BY MANDY GYLES

International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics

It takes mastery in marketing and communications to ensure that agricultural innovations reach farmers, consumers and policymakers. The role is especially important to the 15 centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

A name that is often mentioned when the role of agricultural development communications is discussed is Joanna Kane-Potaka, director of strategic marketing and communication at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). The crop that particularly demonstrates the importance of marketing and communications to agriculture is millet, a highly resilient cereal—the last crop standing when all else has withered because it can withstand high temperatures and survive with little water.

SMART CHOICES, SMARTER FOODS

“Foods such as millet are only known in Australia for bird seed, yet they are highly nutritious,” Ms Kane-Potaka explains.

“Pearl millets can provide the daily allowance of iron—which is important given that anaemia is the largest global issue for nutrition deficiencies. Finger millet has three times the amount of calcium than the equivalent of milk. Millets are gluten free and have a low glycaemic index.”

Ms Kane-Potaka—who began her career as an agricultural economist with the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences and later moved into market research with the then Queensland Department of Primary Industries—believes there is a huge opportunity to develop this market and overcome the funding gap for these grains.

She wants to bring them out from under the shadow of “the big three”—wheat, maize and rice.

“We need to bring more grains into mainstream consumption: to deliver more diverse and healthy diets,” she says.

“To do this we have to also work at the consumer end and secure more policy support.”

Ms Kane-Potaka has initiated a campaign to raise the profile of millets as ‘smart foods’ that are good for people, good for the planet and important for food security for smallholder farmers in developing countries.

PUSHING ADOPTION

The tools used to make research findings available to farmers are also a focus for Ms Kane-Potaka, who is keen to deepen and broaden the end benefits of research findings. One way she did this, while at the International Water Management Institute, was to study 10 of the institute’s projects that were most successful in making positive change for poor communities. That knowledge has allowed her to push the boundaries around the practice of extension. Included is the creation of a software platform for making ICRISAT’s scientific information more easily accessible.

“I led a team to create a platform for our scientific information called EXPLOREit @ ICRISAT,” she says. “We first determined how people come looking for our information. Then through the use of metadata and multiple navigation, made the same information available no matter how a person searches for it. Information is also automatically fed into the platform as soon as it becomes available.”

Bringing agriculture into more mainstream communications and standing out from the crowd is another big challenge that excites Ms Kane-Potaka.

“We have a lot of new initiatives coming out this year to help with this,” she says. “We will launch ‘100 Voices’, a video series around topical issues where we interview people from different disciplines around the world. The first one will be on the future of genomics. ‘Take 2’ will produce short highlights of videoed science seminars.”

A range of e-timelines will come out later this year as a new interactive way to show research work over time. Her ICRISAT team is working with the Ramoji Group to develop content for the world’s first TV station dedicated to farmers and is also setting up an Agri Park to deliver extension messages through ‘info-tainment’.

INVOLVING WOMEN

Ms Kane-Potaka routinely sees a gender gap in the way extension is undertaken: “Only last year I gave the opening talk at a workshop attended only by men,” she says. “I was told that women’s home duties prevented them from spending four days away from home.

“A few weeks ago I was talking to farmers who had all been through training programs but not the women who do the actual planting and

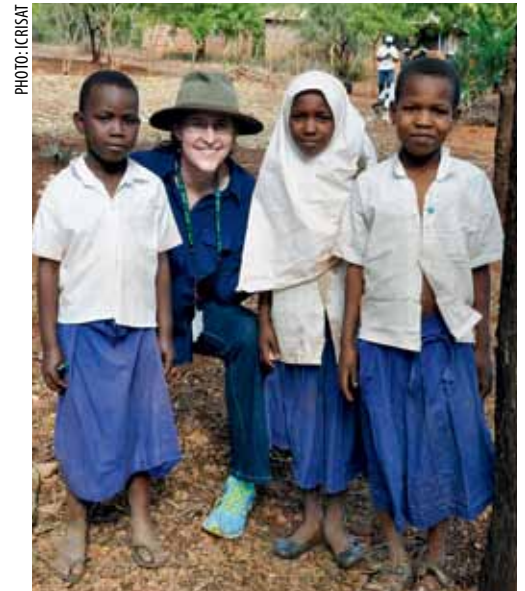


PHOTO: ICRISAT

Joanna Kane-Potaka

Joanna Kane-Potaka has worked and lived in India, Sri Lanka, Italy, Malaysia and the Philippines with four of the CGIAR Centres—the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, the International Water Management Institute, Bioversity International and WorldFish.

harvesting. When I queried this, the men said they let the women know what to do.”

Ms Kane-Potaka believes the full potential of farming systems cannot be reached unless a conscious effort is made to include women. ■

JOANNA KANE-POTAKA'S INTERNATIONAL FOOTPRINT

The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics improves the crops, land and farming systems of the poorest of the poor.

The International Water Management Institute focuses on the sustainable use of water and land resources in developing countries.

Bioversity International acts to safeguard the agricultural and tree biodiversity to attain global food and nutrition security.

WorldFish harnesses the potential of sustainable fisheries and aquaculture to increase food and nutrition security.