



Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the role of development partnerships in agriculture and agribusiness in promoting prosperity, reducing poverty and enhancing stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Public Hearing, Sydney 11 March 2016

Location: Corinthian Room, SMC Conference and Function Centre, 66 Goulburn St, Sydney

Time: 1.30-3pm (arrive at 1.15pm)

Format: Roundtable

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For full terms of reference and Committee membership list, see background briefing provided by Aislinn Batstone on Monday 7 March 2016.

Draft opening comments for A/Professor Robyn Alders, AO

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear here today.

We commend the Parliament for initiating this important inquiry and look forward to engaging with the subsequent report and its findings.

I am Associate Professor Robyn Alders, Principal Research Fellow at the University of Sydney's Faculty of Veterinary Science and Healthy Food Systems Node Lead at our Charles Perkins Centre for Obesity, Diabetes and Cardiovascular Disease.

I am here in my capacity as one of five expert witnesses from the University of Sydney and to give the opening statement on behalf of the University. Our Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Global Engagement) were unfortunately unable to make it today and send their apologies.

My fellow colleagues on the panel are all experts in areas that lie at the heart of this inquiry. I am joined by Professor Mu Li, International Public Health and Nutritional Epidemiology; Professor David Guest, Plant Pathology, Agricultural Productivity and Rural Livelihoods; Professor Robert Park, Sustainable Agriculture, Food Production, Quality and Safety; and Mr Thomas Soem, International Development Partnerships and Projects.

My area is food and nutrition security, animal health and One Health, and I can draw on over 30 years of working in international development.

Our submission offers a summary of our work and that of many others at the University and our collaborating institutions.

Through this collective pursuit we have gained valuable experience in building international development partnerships in developing countries across the Indo-Pacific and Africa.

These projects have produced significant impact for local communities, such as raised productivity and income levels, more inclusive and gender-sensitive economic growth, better use of scarce natural resources, improvements to the sustainability of local farming systems, better diets, and reduced cases of undernutrition and stunting.

Importantly, we have also learnt a significant amount from our developing country partners. If I was to mention one key lesson of a **sustainable and effective development partnership** it would be the fundamental importance of having a long-term vision for our commitment and investment, both financially and emotionally, mutual respect and trust, and shared interests and values.

Our interest in this inquiry is reflected in our institutional mission statement and the University Strategic Plan: underpinned by a culture of mutual respect and integrity, inclusion and diversity, we have a commitment to excellence in research and education, and a desire to more fully engage with the community, industry and business in order to ensure our work is relevant and impactful.

In international development these aspirations translate to a willingness to harness that excellence to address some of the vital national and global challenges of our time, and a desire to engage with the communities for whom our research has real meaning and consequences and from whom we can learn.

One of the greatest challenges of our time concerns sustainable agriculture, food and nutrition security. Indeed, a key question we grapple with and which unifies our work in these fields, is: ***how to provide sufficient nutritious, affordable food for an ever growing population in an ethical and sustainable manner?***

As highlighted in our submission, at the University of Sydney we recognise the entrenched complexity of the issues relating to agriculture and agribusiness in international development, and how to unlock their potential to effectively promote prosperity, reduce poverty and enhance stability in our region.

Competing pressures on soil, water, nutrients, and space for agricultural production are only expected to increase as a result of population growth, economic development, and climate and environmental change.

Malnutrition continues to be a key development challenge, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region where many countries experience both persistent under-nutrition as well as rising obesity rates – a complex phenomenon coined the double burden of malnutrition.

Our approach to **partnerships in research and international development** is therefore increasingly interdisciplinary and supports initiatives that bring expertise together from across the institution; not only our agriculture and veterinary science schools, but medicine, business, social sciences, education and law as well as physics and geoscience.

Drawing from our submission, a good example of this is the The Healthy Food Systems: Nutrition, Safety, Diversity Project Node.

This is a new and innovative research collaboration hosted by two leading multidisciplinary centres - the before mentioned Charles Perkins Centre and the Marie Bashir Institute for Infectious Diseases and Biosecurity.

As part of the group's research, our team is reviewing the political dimensions that can impact positively on food and nutrition security and safety. These dimensions range from legislative frameworks that improve the efficiency of disease control initiatives, to the optimal participation of women across all aspects of agricultural research and extension.

We are also pursuing specific strategies in our **engagement with external partners in agribusiness**. Through the work we do on cocoa farming and sustainable agricultural livelihoods in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea for example, we have developed strong collaborations with local government, NGO and industry stakeholders, including Mars Chocolates and other cocoa buyers.

The benefits have been considerable. Smallholder cocoa farmers have benefited from higher production and income diversification by intensifying cocoa production and freeing surplus land for other food, livestock and cash crops, developing new enterprises that are often more "women-friendly", and resulting in more diversified and resilient farm incomes.

Increased production is also being achieved through **gene identification and improvements** to key food crops. In a global collaboration including the University's Plant Breeding Institute, the CSIRO and international partners, the gene Lr67 has been identified as providing resistance to three of the most important wheat rust diseases, creating the potential to save more than a billion dollars in lost production in Australia each year.

Collaborative approaches that draw on multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral teams and techniques are crucial if we are to address another key issue of this inquiry - **the double burden of under- and over-nutrition**. The human and financial costs associated with malnutrition are staggering and place huge strain on national budgets that are already stretched. Meanwhile, support for agricultural research and development has declined markedly.

In response, we ought to explore ways that enable health and agriculture to come together to provide a cost-efficient solution to these challenges.

Nutrition-sensitive value chains are currently under discussion in the international development arena in relation to **food security and human health**. The approach provides a framework for interdisciplinary discussions around all aspects of food and nutrition security from soils, food production to market chains, to consumers, food wastage, human physiology and social and cultural issues, including closer integration of rural communities and indigenous populations, and improved attention to the nutrition- and gender-sensitivity of agricultural interventions.

Indeed, my personal work on village poultry in Timor-Leste shows clear evidence of the life-changing impact a gender-sensitive project can have on the **economic empowerment of women** and their families and communities. Women who control village poultry and who can make decisions on how household incomes from their livestock are allocated, spend more money on nutritious food, health care and education. Reports show that an increase in women's income of \$10 achieves the same improvements to children's nutrition and health as an increase in a man's income of \$110. If we can empower more women, we will achieve improved nutrition, while building economic opportunity and supporting educational outcomes.

In conclusion, and as we recommend in our submission, we urge the Committee to:

- Ensure that Commonwealth funding for agriculture development programs provides medium to long-term certainty for multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary research and international development partnerships.
- Support initiatives that enable the university sector to engage actively with community and private sector groups to accelerate the adoption of tailored and feasible technologies and innovations.
- Advocate for a long-term vision and commitment of the Australian Aid Program's future investment in agriculture and agribusiness to effectively promote prosperity, reduce poverty and enhance stability in our region.

In closing, I would like to thank you once again for this opportunity and for your attention to our remarks.

On behalf of the University, I would also like to extend a warm invitation to all the Members of the Committee to come and visit one or more of our campuses and project sites, and engage with the rich research and teaching community we are so proud to be part of and experience first-hand the development partnerships to which we contribute.



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The role of universities in promoting prosperity in our region

****Embargoed 11 March 2016****

Five representatives from the University of Sydney will today address the [Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's Inquiry into the role of development partnerships in agriculture and agribusiness in promoting prosperity, reducing poverty and enhancing stability in the Indo-Pacific region](#).

They will argue that universities must and should play a role in developing the Indo-Pacific region. The University of Sydney is the only Australian university to have made a submission to the inquiry and present to the committee, demonstrating its strong commitment to enhancing research and international development partnerships in the region.

One of academics to present at the committee today, Associate Professor Robyn Alders, was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2011 for her work on food security in developing countries.

"At the University of Sydney we strive to find the best solutions to help solve the most difficult problems of our time and in our region," Associate Professor Alders said.

"One of the greatest challenges we grapple with and which unifies our efforts is: how do we provide sufficient nutritious and affordable food for an ever growing population in the region in ways that are ethical and sustainable?"

"Achieving food security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific will not only require the application of new knowledge and technology, but innovation in partnership models and more effective collaboration between agribusiness, governments, civil society and universities."

Representatives from the University presenting at the committee today include:

- **Associate Professor Robyn Alders AO** from the Charles Perkins Centre and Faculty of Veterinary Science;
- **Professor David Guest** from the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment;
- **Professor Robert Park**, the Judith and David Coffey Chair in Sustainable Agriculture from the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment;
- **Professor Mu Li** from the Sydney Medical School; and

- **Mr Thomas Soem**, Head, International Agencies and Governments Program, Office of Global Engagement.

In a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade delivered at the end of last year, the University outlined five University of Sydney case studies of successful research projects that can make a difference in the Indo-Pacific region.

The case studies highlighted the real impact the University can have in improving the livelihoods of some of the poorest countries in our region. The projects included:

- **Improving nutrition security and livelihoods in Myanmar**
This project, a world first, will identify the underlying causes of undernourishment in Myanmar, thereby assisting national policy and international efforts to address this problem.
- **Enhancing food security and economic growth in South Asia through genetic improvements to key food crops**
Grain research is central to the global effort to develop disease-resistant and drought-tolerant strains of wheat, barley, oats and other cereal crops. Our researchers have targeted two genetic traits to improve crop performance: those that increase resistance to pests and diseases; and those that control how the crop responds to drought and heat.

The University is currently working on wheat breeding programs with two institutions in India - the Directorate of Wheat Research in Karnal and the Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana.

- **Strengthening food and nutrition security through village poultry in Timor-Leste**
In Timor-Leste approximately 50 percent of children suffer from stunted growth due to malnutrition. More than 30 percent of women suffer from chronic energy deficiency, reflected in the high maternal mortality rate.

Since November 2014 we have developed an approach to improving the health of village poultry in Timor-Leste that has focused on the role women can play in combating malnutrition. The program has increased the number of households raising poultry by 13 percent.

- **Public-private partnerships in cocoa farming in Southeast Asia**
Our researchers are working with private sector and industry partners in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to improve the livelihoods of cocoa farmers.

Cocoa is the main source of income for an estimated 400,000 farmers in Indonesia and a further 400,000 in Papua New Guinea. Global demand is strong, but neither region has the infrastructure or support for farmers facing threats, particularly from pests, diseases and climate uncertainty.

In Indonesia, our researchers have developed strong collaborations with local government, NGO and industry stakeholders, including Mars Chocolates and other cocoa buyers. These partnerships enable us to select more robust and high yielding cocoa genotypes, improve the sustainability and profitability of cocoa farming, and

develop new business opportunities, especially for women and young people.

- **Creating new research and education hubs to nurture innovation and cross-sector collaborations**

A team of 34 researchers from various faculties within and outside the University of Sydney is looking at the challenges to nutrition, diversity and food safety from a multitude of perspectives, with the ultimate goal of creating healthier and more sustainable communities.

[The Healthy Food Systems: Nutrition, Safety, Diversity Project Node](#) is a new and innovative research collaboration based within the University of Sydney.

Read the full submission [here](#) (PDF 579).

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