

SESSION 4 Q&A

Chair: Jo Grainger

Acting First Assistant Secretary, Trade and International Division,
Australian Dept of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF)

Q. Chair: A question to all the panel. What do you think is the way, as a co-leadership model, to look at institutional partnerships and capacity building?

A. Seeseei Molimau-Samasoni: A lot of the genuine partnership and co-leadership that we try to build in the Pacific involves talanoa – inclusive dialogue – and it also involves encouraging our partners to share. After many years of having project partners coming in and just telling us what to do, added to our culture of respect, we find it very difficult to contradict or to go against what our project partners propose. Something that we have found worked very well was participatory and interactive workshops when we are trying to design a project together with co-design and co-leadership. We have also been fortunate enough to work with partners who have been open to the idea of shifting their research agenda in proposed projects. When they have brought in a project that we have not been able to design together, we have sat down and discussed with them what the *project* wanted to achieve and what the *realities* were on the ground, and worked together with them through a participatory, interactive and talanoa session on what we *both* wanted to achieve through the project. That ensured that the work that we were doing in the project addressed the objectives set for the research funding, and also addressed *our* research priorities to answer our research challenges.

A. Shaun Coffey: I would add to that. In a practical operational sense, quite often it is as simple as giving people in the room ‘permission’ to do things or to speak up or to give voice to their ideas. We often create the participatory frameworks and sessions, but then when we observe that people aren’t participating we try to make interventions that, in fact, don’t reflect the local culture or the local norms. So, just giving people the opportunity to voice their thoughts, and creating a safe environment in which they can do that, is good. We have had that experience directly, in a particular workshop where Dr Samasoni stopped everyone by voicing some major concerns – and many of us in the room with Western tradition and non-Pacific tradition suddenly saw things in a new way! It’s about giving people ‘permission’ to speak up.

Q. Tom Swan, University of Sydney: My question is along those lines. I was very interested to hear Seeseei talk about local champions, and I would like some advice about how you find and foster the local champions, given that you said that at times it can be a risk for them to be acting and serving on our projects.

A. Seeseei Molimau-Samasoni: It can be a challenge at times, but when you do – sometimes once in a blue moon – identify a really fantastic local champion, I think it is very important to build that relationship with them; to have friendship, open friendship, that is comfortable enough for them to start letting you know when they are at risk as a result of the collaboration, as a result of the capacity building that they are receiving as part of the co-leadership and by being a local champion on the project. It may just be that they need someone to talk to, or mentoring in terms of how to navigate being the tall poppy that is about to be ‘chopped off’. I think you need to develop that relationship and that friendship to support the person, and be able to discuss possible options for how they can survive.

Q. Beris Gwynne, Incitare International: With a session on rethinking partnerships and capacity building to support transformational impacts of R&D, I want to congratulate all the speakers who have spoken on the need for us to resist applied or assumed wisdom; to question the worldviews and paradigms that have built up over the last 50 or 60 years and have colonised words like ‘partnering’, ‘outcome’ and even ‘capacity building’.

My interests at the moment are in the impact-investing space. I am based in Geneva in Switzerland. What I find is, first, that the extraordinary expertise that ACIAR brings to the table, and that Australia brings more broadly, is typically not at all visible at those impact-investing conferences.

I would like to invite the panellists, as well as the organisers of this extraordinary event, to consider that, at a future meeting, there might be a conversation about partnering and capacity building to engage with the private sector – and not just the companies with money for corporate social responsibility (CSR) but in the impact-investing space. That’s where real transformation will take place. So any comments that you have, that might help me to get better traction in Geneva, would be appreciated.

Chair: Anyone who is offering impact-investment dollars is very welcome at this conference, I think.

Q. Peter Wynn, Charles Sturt University: Dr Shah, I noticed in all your photographs that there are almost no women involved with the measurement of irrigation, and conferences, and field work. Is this a challenge for you? Because women obviously are very much in charge of the food supply for the family.

A. Azeem Ali Shah: The reality is we have a lot of male dominance, particularly in the irrigated agriculture sector here in Pakistan, and especially in the government and public sector organisations. We have to take a direct approach and specify that you have to involve female representatives from your departments. That is the strategy we have been pursuing. But at the household level, at the farmer level, there have been separate interventions for the females and for the males, because cultural barriers are involved and the females do not like to be with male counterparts. It may not have been clear in the presentation but we have a lot of interventions with farmers – female as well as male. But when it comes to the private sector and government departments, we make sure that the invitations include proper representation of the females, which is a maximum of 20% or 25% in their workforce.

Q. Mikayla Hyland-Wood, from ACIAR and the RAID Network: A question for Seeseei about balancing international capacity development opportunities for those exceptional Pacific students while also avoiding contributing to the brain drain to Australia, New Zealand and other funding countries. What advice do you have for funders interested in developing Pacific capacity, in agricultural research or related disciplines, that aligns with Pacific values?

A. Seeseei Molimau-Samasoni: We probably can’t stop people from moving away, in terms of the brain drain. (I have stayed behind out of loyalty and out of love for country.) In terms of supporting capacity-building initiatives for our exceptional students, I’ve heard a lot about the New Colombo Plan. A lot of scholars are talking about how eye-opening and enlightening the experience was. I think if our agricultural researchers or budding students had the same level of exposure, where they can visit another country and see what potential is out there – that they could then bring back to the Pacific Islands to help build our capacity and improve our food security – that could also be transformational. Often, our agricultural researchers stay in the Pacific, and their careers can be limited when they don’t have that level of exposure that perhaps the New Colombo Plan is offering Australian students.

Q. (male): There are Australian farmers who use labour from the Pacific to harvest their crops. That can’t be very good income for families on the various islands in the Pacific. Are there negative effects of this very extensive industry?

A. Seeseei Molimau-Samasoni: That is so, and we hear a lot about it from our private sector business. It is starting to affect our education and our nursing and our healthcare systems, where teachers, policemen, and nurses are leaving the Samoan workforce, or the Pacific workforce in general, because it is more financially rewarding to travel to New Zealand and Australia to work on a seasonal scheme, where in six months they will make more money than they normally would over two or three years working in the Pacific. That leads not only to a shortage in those industries and sectors, but it also negatively impacts our ability to produce our own food when there is less labour available to work the land. Often, the people who leave on the Seasonal Worker scheme are the able-bodied youth whom we really need to start producing food locally. It’s very difficult to try and hold people back when they know that it is beneficial for their families, because many of these seasonal workers come back and they buy new cars for their parents and they build houses for their parents. Meanwhile,

there will be people who have worked in the Pacific for more than ten years and are still trying to pay off their car loan. It's a difficult space to navigate.

Chair: Yes, and the farm workers from the Pacific are incredibly valued by the agriculture sector here. Yet we need to look after them better when they are here.

This has been a fascinating conversation, giving us a lot of thinking to do.
Thank you very much to all our speakers.