

Commonwealth Day Message

Science Technology and Society: recognizing agricultural science heroes for a better future

Dr Denis Blight AO FRSA

The history of the British Empire, from which the modern Commonwealth grew, is rich in heroes: explorers, soldiers, missionaries, and governors. At the end of the 19th century a new breed of contributors – in the biological sciences and agriculture - emerged.

It was Winston Churchill in 1910 who championed the application of discoveries by these new heroes to better deal with unknown human, animal and crop pests and diseases. This became of central importance in both Imperial and then Commonwealth policy and led, for example, to the establishment of the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureau in 1913 which still operates today in more than 100 countries as CAB International.

The scientific pioneers shared several attributes - scientific qualifications, a searching curiosity about the nature of things, and ambitions for agricultural research careers in the Empire and Commonwealth. They searched the edges of the streams, swamps and rivers of tropical Africa for the tsetse fly and other insects injurious to man, animals and crops - to better understand and devise protections against them and other pests.

Over the last 100 years many others have researched this complex and fragile web of life; and built partnerships and professional associations, that have lasted to this day and reach well beyond formal government to non-governmental links or aid programs.

New approaches were devised to harness the resulting enormous growth of knowledge.

With advances in information and telecommunication technologies databases became available on CD ROM and then the Internet. The gap between discovery and delivery fell to a few weeks and then to days. Now important knowledge in agriculture can be accessed by mobile telephone and passed from one village to the next by video, even in remote and isolated communities.

Agricultural science was once a pre-occupation of the Commonwealth whose work was a small but important part of the Green Revolution of the 60s and 70s that averted famine in Asia. In the 80s and 90s other priorities such as health, manufacturing and education took centre stage. These are all important, but we now face another point in history, some 100 years after Churchill championed research in the House of Commons, when increased demand for food is outstripping growth in global agricultural productivity. New challenges of climate change and in global finances have emerged. Global famine threatens unless attention is turned to agricultural research and development and supportive public policy so that growth in food production can again outstrip growth in demand.

It is particularly important that more young Commonwealth citizens consider careers in agriculture. They will need heroes in those sciences to inspire them – to invent vaccines against animal diseases, breed new higher yielding, drought tolerant varieties of food grains, and to devise farming practices that use less fertiliser and fewer pesticides.

The modern Commonwealth is well placed to foster these heroes.