

“Giving young people a chance in agricultural research and development”

Keynote presentation on “What do young people expect from their research institution?” at the CGIAR Gender and Diversity Program’s Annual Networking Event, held at the CGIAR Annual General Meeting 2008, Mozambique, 30th November 2008.

By: Nadia Manning-Thomas

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Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

It is so nice to see such a large and diverse crowd here tonight at the G&D Women’s Networking event 2008.

My name is Nadia Manning-Thomas, Thomas being a new addition to my name from getting married earlier this year.

I am 29 years old, of mixed raced, and from the beautiful, small island of Barbados in the southern Caribbean. There are unfortunately not many of us from the Caribbean on the books in the CGIAR but that is perhaps the subject of another talk.

I am extremely honoured to be here tonight at the Annual G&D Women’s Networking event at AGM 2008 giving this short talk on being a young woman in the CGIAR.

I was asked to start this talk by indicating “HOW I GOT INTO AG RESEARCH”

I have been working for the International Water Management Institute- a Centre of the CGIAR now for three and a half years—perhaps not a very long time compared to many of you in the audience but for a ‘young’ person-- it is a considerable investment in one place already for me.

But how did I get here? How did I find myself in the world of agricultural research (and development)?

Well it has been an incredible journey so far... and if I may be permitted to fall into the stereotypes of our Centres, I would like to use the metaphor of a river to explain my own personal journey—my own ‘river of life’.

The source of my river is my home island of Barbados-- made up of 21 by 14 miles of land and populated by 250,000 people—boy was I shocked to find out when I grew up that this was not in fact big nor a lot of people.

Despite a wonderful upbringing by my parents, good schooling, and of course the undeniably good conditions that Barbados has to offer (such as its well known cultural activities, beaches and sunshine), I was yearning to see the world from a young age. But with parents of lower to middle income and being far away from the world, even the expectation of going away to University somewhere outside of Barbados seemed far beyond my grasp.

But my chance came in the form of being chosen to represent my country at one of the United World Colleges –Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. Someone believed in me, someone saw beyond my fairly good grades in school to what more I had done

and could do, someone decided to take a chance on me and give me an opportunity which would be the start of a change in my life's journey-my river would now widen and chart a new course.

I spent two fantastic years in the forests of Vancouver Island with 200 other students from 83 different countries, doing the International Baccalaureate, undertaking every extra curricular activity I could, and discovering many new things.

As this experience was ending, I then got another chance.

I was chosen as the proud recipient of a one-per-year full scholarship for an outstanding international student to do an undergraduate degree at Grinnell College in Iowa, USA. My journey was now to continue to the mid-west of America.

Spending four years at Grinnell, a liberal arts college, I was able to try many different and exciting subjects and courses, but finally limited myself to an anthropology major with archaeology specialty, an environmental studies minor, and equivalent credits in global religious studies.

During my time at Grinnell I was given the opportunity to do a study abroad program during my third year. In the summer of 2000 I headed off to Tanzania, my first African experience, for a semester of courses at University of Dar es Salaam, a few months of fieldwork, and a homestay with a local Tanzanian family.

It was during my fieldwork in Tanzania that my river majorly shifted direction again. I remember very vividly a day during our 2 month archaeological dig in Laetoli, near the Ngorongoro crater when a group of Maasai morani warriors gathered around us as we were carefully chipping and brushing the surrounding rock encasing an exciting bone we had found. In the limited English they spoke they asked us what we were doing and in our limited Maa we replied naively "We are looking for old bones".

They seemed puzzled but nodded agreeably, before leaving us swiftly. We didn't think much of it. But about an hour later the group of warriors returned proudly carrying a cloth sack, the contents of which they emptied in front us—before us now lay many, many bones of various types, ages, and states. In shock we asked them where they had gotten all these bones and they waved their arms around to depict the general area where we were working—what we considered to be our 'site' and which they considered to be their home. When we asked them how they had gotten the bones-one of them promptly lifted up his spear and brought it down just above the bone we had been working on, ejecting it from its bed of rock where it had probably been sitting for about 100,000 years, and smiled broadly at us.

It was obvious at this moment that what we were doing was not only not understood by these guys, but was perhaps silly or useless in the midst of their own lives. They were experiencing major issues around their pastoralist activities with the government cutting down on their range of movement and often forcing them into sedentary lifestyles on marginal lands. As a result people there were suffering from a lack of food, access to clean drinking water and basic services in this new imposed lifestyle. This area now had major TB infection rates, high cases of malaria(which I too suffered from) and other health problems.

And so on this day, despite my love for archaeology, my mind and heart made a shift to trying to respond to the priorities and needs of people in this day.

My chance to try this out came as I neared the finish of my University degree when I was awarded a post-graduate fellowship to do a year with a local NGO in Namibia-the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia at their research station in the middle of the Namib desert- Gobabeb. This one year stay quickly turned into three, where I was again exposed to the extreme vagaries of rural life, especially in arid areas. Working with communities on the desert margin, I became even more aware of the pertinent issues of water, agricultural production, and livestock keeping in peoples' lives.

After three years of wonderful on the ground experiences and a lot of learning by doing, I decided to pursue further training through undertaking a Masters degree in Development and environment studies in the School of Agriculture at the University of Reading, in the UK.

During my masters degree, i became acutely aware of many of the disasters in interventions that had occurred in development—often due to taking action before really understanding the situation, exploring options, and basing interventions on good information.

I wanted to learn better about the way that knowledge could be effectively generated and applied towards the best outcomes— a way of thinking that would lead me down a very different part of the river. Before I even finished my studies I was already applying for jobs—mostly with research institutes or departments.

I then found a job advertisement which I thought was perfect for me— it was a research position looking at livelihoods and water and agriculture and development at the International Water Management Institute. The only hiccup was that it was presented as a post-doc position and I hadn't 'yet' done a PhD, I took the chance and applied anyway. Out of almost a hundred applications (so I am told) mine was picked out— the only application for a post-doc position without the doc! Nevertheless I was again given a chance. A position made up of part research and part communication, working on knowledge sharing— was put together and offered to me. Two new branches of my river now formed—agricultural research and knowledge sharing.

When Vicki approached me about giving a talk at this year's Women's Networking event she proposed that I talk about what it is like to be a young woman in the CGIAR, show the constraints and give some recommendations to address these. I immediately thought "great! this will be a good opportunity to rant about all the things that I don't like, that don't happen and that don't work in the CGIAR". But as I started to give the content of my talk some thought, I realized that from my own perspective that I have in fact been very fortunate and have had many opportunities and positive experiences. And I realized that in fact this could be an even better way to promote 'good practices' that should or could be replicated.

So what I want to share with you, what I want you all to take back to your centres are my top 5 recommendations, based on my own experiences and ideas.

1. Give people a chance—make opportunities... and let them take a chance

As you will have seen from the description of my life I have presented, I have been given many chances, have had many opportunities and even taken some chances. This doesn't mean that I haven't got qualifications, skills and capacity, worked hard or challenged myself.

The reality is that for many women, especially from an array of diverse backgrounds, it is not always as easy to obtain the type of qualifications, experience and other expected attributes that often form the typical job descriptions or terms of reference. But they may have a lot to offer, if given a chance!

Also in order to grow within the institutes we work in—young people, need to be given opportunities to learn, be constructively challenged, be exposed to new things, gain skills in necessary areas (e.g budgeting, management), and take responsibility.

I have benefited greatly from some senior researchers at IWMI giving me certain chances or opportunities within the Institute. I have learned a lot from opportunities to be a project leader, to be part of decision-making in the Institute such as serving on a recruitment panel, from running a session at the recent Annual Research Meeting, representing IWMI such as at a GWP technical committee meeting, and much more.

All of these opportunities have helped me to build capacity, grow more confident and gain relevant experiences—things which cannot be obtained by formal courses, but make a difference in the pathway your career and personal development takes.

2. Mentorship and support

I have been very lucky to have had some good mentorship in my life and believe it is a key ingredient in young peoples' and perhaps everyone's work lives. I would like to thank all those who have mentored me during my time in the CGIAR. The mentorship I have been given has allowed me the necessary space and relationships to discuss my work, identify my strengths and weaknesses, to explore my future possibilities, share successes and struggles, and find solutions to problems.

My experiences with mentorship have been positive but have usually been informal arrangements sought out by me and agreed to by those who I have wanted to mentor me.

I strongly believe that lacking a culture of mentorship— a structured mentorship system should be organized in our Centres and programs. It made me happy to see in our last all staff meeting at IWMI the need for and steps towards organizing mentoring presented as one of the key action areas to be undertaken by the HR division in the coming year.

But beyond formal mentorship, I believe that wider support especially by senior staff members can go a long way for supporting and developing young people in our institutes. Let me share an experience from AGM last year to illustrate this.

Last year I attended a CGIAR AGM for the first time and let me tell you that as a young woman it can be a bit intimidating—you don't know many people at all, everyone has so much more experience and knowledge than you, and there is a lot of high level stuff going on around you. At the session on the CGIAR Change Management process, I had some urgent concerns that we were not really discussing the true heart of the matter of change that needed to take place in the CGIAR. For me I felt we really needed to address better how the valuable knowledge generated by the CGIAR could better reach those who need it and can use it, how it can make a difference in the lives of people like those I have met at various points in my journey which lead me to do this type of work.

But the room was filled with DGs, Board members, people from management teams from various centres as well as donors and representatives of important partners of the CGIAR—and if I can be a bit rude—I was also much younger than anyone else in the room by at least 10 years. So even though I consider myself quite a confident person, I was unsure of whether to put up my hand to make my point. Finally, I raised my hand and made my point, struggling to keep my nerves at bay. Finally the point was made and I felt proud of myself for summoning the courage to say what I wanted to say—not leaving with regrets and a mind full of ideas. My own feeling of pride would perhaps been enough, but at the end of the session a number of people came up to me and congratulated me on making my intervention, commenting how it was an important thing to have been said and how well I articulated my point. I particularly remember Steve Hall, DG from WorldFish coming over to me to shake my hand and telling me what a good job I did in bringing this point up. I was so flattered by all of this—a feeling which remains with me today and which I call upon when in situations where I worry or question whether I should or am able to make a point in a meeting.

So simple acts of recognition, praise of good efforts and achievements as well as noticing when people seem to be struggling and offering help can have immense implications and should be the responsibility of all within the Centres.

3. Look more broadly at performance evaluation and career progression indicators when it comes to women, especially young women

While I often have many issues with the one-size-fits-all performance evaluation that is widely used in the CGIAR, due to my belief in the diversity of contributions various researchers may make to knowledge generation, knowledge sharing and knowledge application, I also take issue with it from the perspective of young women.

As I am thinking about starting a family in the next few years, I see little avenue in some of the current systems, to continue active career progression while having a family, due to the consequences a break in time at work and change in priorities in life can have.

The current strong focus on evaluation based on work done in a particular year compounded by the use of a limited number of indicators of valuable performance is particularly limiting in the circumstances that many women find themselves in. For a woman endeavoring to have a family in the middle of her career (or as she may see it-having a career in the middle of her family) it is sometimes difficult to keep up pace with activities and responsibilities which give you the necessary elements for career progression such as leadership of projects, an active publications pipeline, travel and fieldwork and current networks. Over a number of years, this has a cumulative negative effect on career progression, especially compared to male peers, from which it is often hard to recover.

4. Work on institutional arrangements and policies which help to support young women with other elements of their lives

There are important things that an institute can and should do to support young women including:

- Developing and offering good spousal employment policies- which may be especially pertinent for young women trying to move around with a spouse also looking to develop a career. Although things are changing, I am sure we can all agree that it is still harder for a woman to have a trailing male spouse.
- Providing opportunities for child care such as a Creche—of which we see an excellent example at IWMI HQ-can make a world of difference in helping a woman to be a mother and researcher at the same time. The crèche at IWMI is so wonderful in fact that it almost makes you want to have children just to be able to make use of such wonderful facilities.
- Making Flexible working hours available and workable can also be vital in enabling a more realistic work-life balance for those who need it
- And finally particular policies and actions need to be carried out to protect the welfare of staff, and particularly women who are often most vulnerable to things such as harassment and abuse.

Myself and another female colleague once walked into a workshop room, to be greeted by a male colleague who commented out loud for all to hear about 'how nice it is to see female colleagues wearing skirts'. To some in the room then and perhaps even to some of you in the room now-this may have seemed like a fairly innocent comment...but this comment immediately served to make the two of us who it was aimed at uncomfortable. A few so-called simple words had managed to reduce us as women to the most basic form of sexuality, and disrespecting us as intelligent, capable counterparts. I am happy to say that the IWMI system allowed for this type of mis-deemeanour to be reported and dealt with by the appropriate people.

5. Voice and participation

Finally, young people, want to feel as though we are a true part of what is going on around us. We want to be involved and have some say and participation in what happens not only in our particular work or projects, but in the Centres themselves, as well as the CGIAR.

I have enjoyed the opportunity to work on a system-wide project- the ICT-KM's Knowledge Sharing in Research project which has allowed me the chance to participate in work across the whole of the CGIAR as well as giving me a voice in how we can do better research for development. And while we can't all now run system-wide projects, it is useful to think about how to include your young women staff members in some key Centre and CGIAR activities.

As many of you might know--- my generation- the young members of the CGIAR- are considered to be part of the MTV 'Big Brother' generation!!!

This means we have:

- * short attention spans
- * Expect fast results
- * and have a desire and expectation to influence everything around us

Thank you very much!