New Director General for ICRISAT

Dr Jacqueline d’Arros Hughes, a well-known plant health expert and leader in international agricultural research, took charge as Director General at ICRISAT (International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics). Owing to travel restrictions, Dr Hughes assumed office from the Philippines during a virtual event, where she outlined priorities for the institute during and post COVID-19 pandemic.

“We need to help where we can in the short-term with the COVID-19 response. ICRISAT’s help will be in assuring productivity in the Semi-Arid Tropics. Risk to people, staff, communities, stakeholders, and the research on which many of our stakeholders depend, has to be minimised as the lockdown lifts,” she stressed. The virtual event was attended by ICRISAT staff and the Governing Board. Dr Hughes took charge from Dr Peter Carberry, who has returned to Australia.

After earning a doctoral degree in microbiology/virology and spending her early research years in the UK, Dr Hughes, a British national, moved to Ghana in the early 1990s to work with the Cocoa Research Institute and then at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Nigeria, where she took on increasingly challenging roles in virology, germplasm and plant health management, and eventually was appointed Councilor for IITA’s highest research management body. She then joined the World Vegetable Centre in Taiwan as its Deputy Director General – Research.

Before joining ICRISAT, Dr Hughes was Deputy Director General–Research at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines. IRRI and ICRISAT are sister institutes in CGIAR – the world’s largest agricultural research for development body.

“Her work and that of the teams she has led has delivered significant impact across Africa and Asia, improving the livelihoods of some of the poorest communities,” said Dr Paco Sereme, Chair, ICRISAT Governing Board. “She has gained invaluable insight to the world of international agricultural research having worked about 15 years in Africa and 15 years in Asia. During this time, she has overseen a diverse number of programs encompassing numerous issues such as strategic innovation, sustainable impact and cross-cutting research support.”

At the moment, Dr Hughes is focused on mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on agriculture by supporting smallholder farmers in the Semi-Arid Tropics of Africa and Asia in finding ways to safely return to their farms and ward off food crisis. She also said the year 2020 must be observed with greater resolve as the International Year of Plant Health, as declared by the United Nations.

When asked what drew her to agricultural research, Dr Hughes said the drive to help farmers and their families led her to it. “The science and research was always there in my family. But I also grew up in rural areas where I admired the knowledge and wisdom of traditional farmers. They couldn’t always see their way out for something better but they certainly knew how to manage their environment,” she said, adding that it is the farmers who are responsible for providing us our food and this encouraged her from a very early age to work for helping them and their children to have a better life.

Calling for making agriculture profitable, Dr Hughes opined it is the only way to attract youth. She also emphasised the need for gender equity and urged researchers to look at project proposals with a gender lens to understand how ICRISAT’s work could affect women and men, and to ensure it does not undermine either. She said equity can lead to gender equality by empowering women to step up to the same level as men.

On ensuring ICRISAT’s mandate crops, which are climate-smart and nutritious, go from the farm to the fork, Dr Hughes highlighted the importance of consumer demand. “Agriculture is a business and new products need new proof of concept through consumers and farmers as well. How do we get consumers to change? If the product is better, healthier, cheaper and tastier. That should pull the consumer towards the Read more..