Tech administrator makes contribution to global food security

Global food security reached national consciousness in 2007 and 2008, when food riots in over 25 countries brought attention to the fact that many people in the world do not have enough to eat each day. For one person at Virginia Tech, his life mission has been to combat this vexing problem.

Growing up as the son of a British civil servant in colonial Burma and serving as captain of his college cricket team, S.K. De Datta, associate vice president for international affairs and director of the Office of International Research, Education, and Development, never thought he would one day wind up on the other side of the globe at an American university in the Blue Ridge Mountains. But his fascination with how the natural world works led him to study soil science — a choice that would later land him at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines.

There, De Datta was able to pursue his passion for research that could address food insecurity issues. In 1968, he published his findings that a variety of rice, IR-8, produced 10 times the yield of traditional rice. This discovery and associated technologies led to the so-called Green Revolution, a development in agriculture that allowed the production of food to keep up with the growing populations of Asia.

Virginia Tech has been at the forefront of food security issues since 1991, with grants managed by the Office of International Research, Education, and Development alone totaling $148 million. Increasing tomato production in Mali, improving the handling of peanuts in Uganda, helping grow better eggplant in Bangladesh, and planting better varieties of beans in Haiti mean that people will lead better lives. Children will be better nourished, and the extra income will allow them to go to school.

De Datta arrived at Virginia Tech in 1991, shortly thereafter winning a multiyear, multimillion dollar grant from the United States Agency of International Development. This created the Integrated Pest Management Collaborative Research Support Program, which raises the standard of living through sustainable agricultural practices in developing countries around the world.

This project led to others, and now the Office of International Research, Education and Development (OIRED) manages projects worth $88 million in 44 countries around the globe.

"What S.K. and his team have done is remarkable," says Virginia Tech's senior vice president and provost Mark McNamee. "Their initiatives abroad boost Virginia Tech's stature and increase our global recognition, affording more partnership opportunities for our researchers and more avenues for our students to secure jobs in the international marketplace."

The money supports research such as that done by Jeff Alwang. "The work I'm doing on growing potatoes in mountainous areas of the Andes, I would not be able to do without the support I've gotten," says Alwang, a professor in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Through his research, Alwang has discovered ways to improve soil quality and reduce erosion on the steep slopes of Ecuador and Bolivia.

In September, OIRED won the largest single award that Virginia Tech has ever received in any field — $28 million from the U.S. Agency for International Development to revamp the agriculture curriculum in Senegal's institutions of higher education over five years.

Not only do these projects address food security, but they also raise the stature of Virginia Tech, making the university — in the words of George Norton, professor of agricultural and applied economics — "the envy of the land grant system."

De Datta, who is point person for the Virginia Tech, India campus, has championed gender as a key element of international research and development projects, supporting the Women in International Development office and its mission of ensuring that women benefit from development work. Under De Datta's leadership, Education Abroad has doubled the number of students going overseas each year. Today, more than 1,200 Virginia Tech students a year go to a wide range of places including Botswana and Dubai, not just the traditional countries in Europe.

But of all of his endeavors over the years, De Datta ranks his work in food security near the top. "To make a difference in the life of a farming family in Haiti or Mali or Bangladesh, to know that children are now drinking milk and getting adequate nutrition, is immensely satisfying."

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