A focus on focus: Reigning in an eclectic past to make a bigger difference

Tom Randolph

An agricultural economist who came to East Africa to work at ILRI 13 years ago, Tom Randolph started his professional career ‘on the other side’—working as a policy wonk for crop research at the West African Rice Development Association (now AfricaRice), in Senegal and Côte D’Ivoire. Before that, he had spent six years teaching English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zaire, where he picked up French (his undergraduate degree had been, naturally, Chinese) and an understanding of why food production matters. When he returned to America, he got himself into post-graduate agricultural programs at Cornell University, doing some (award-winning) doctoral research on the impacts of agricultural commercialization on child nutrition in Malawi.

During his years at ILRI, Randolph continued his eclectic career path, moving with apparent relative ease among topics as varied as smallholder competitiveness and the (uneasy) marriage of economics and epidemiology, but making fairly regular returns to topics on nutritional and health issues—from studies of the possible nutritional household benefits of keeping dairy cows, to transmission of zoonotic diseases between farm animals and their human keepers, to food safety in traditional ‘wet’ versus modern livestock markets, to the impacts of tick-borne diseases on the poor, to the effectiveness of animal health delivery systems for African smallholders.

Randolph appears to be most at home when deliberating the pro-poor utility of what is known in development jargon as ‘interventions’, whether they be employing a vaccine against tick-transmitted East Coast fever or drugs to treat tsetse-transmitted African animal trypanosomosis, deploying tsetse-trapping baits on pastoral cattle herds, or implementing alternative (typically wildly inappropriate) methods for controlling bird flu in Africa’s rural and urban environments.

In these deliberations, Randolph tends to takes sides—typically that of the small-scale food producer or hungry consumer awkwardly positioned somewhere between a rock and a hard place.

With such an eclectic background, it may at first be perplexing to find Randolph taking up directorship of a research program restricting itself to a tight focus on the relatively old-fashioned ambition of raising levels of livestock food production in a few resource-poor countries and livestock systems. But Randolph has left himself some flexibility in the name of his
new program, which proclaims its ambitions to be ‘more meat, milk and fish by and for the poor’ (that English major of his did not go to waste).

So it appears we have a scientist of unusually diverse interests, talents, expertise and experience about to reign himself in, for—he says in this 6-minute interview—greater focus for the purpose of making greater impacts. It should be an interesting journey.

Contributed by Tom Randolph, director of CGIAR Research Program (3.7: Livestock and Fish)

View a video interview: http://ilriclippings.wordpress.com/tag/livestock/

On 9 and 10 November 2011, the ILRI Board of Trustees hosted a 2-day ‘liveSTOCK Exchange’ to discuss and reflect on livestock research for development.