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UCT's women scientists make their mark in Africa

Dr Gina Ziervogel won the Distinguished Young Women Researcher (humanities and social scientists), and two young scientists were awarded prestigious scholarships, at the Women in Science Awards 2015.

The Women in Science Awards (WISA) 2015 were founded by the Department of Science and Technology in 2003 as an intervention to reward and recognise women in the sciences.

WISA 2015 chose the theme 'Science for a sustainable future'. The theme is based on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which had a deadline of 2015, and are now superseded by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). These goals set out a number of objectives, including addressing extreme poverty and ensuring basic human rights in health, education, shelter and security.

The ceremony on Thursday night did not shy away from the progress that still has to be made in achieving the ambitions of both these initiatives. However, the finalists and winners were all powerful testaments to how much has been done.

In addressing the impacts of climate change and infectious diseases, the young scientists, who represented UCT at WISA 2015, are tackling issues that disproportionately affect Africa; progress in these areas would certainly lead to a more sustainable future.

"We are immensely proud of our WISA 2015 scientists," said Professor Danie Visser, deputy vice-chancellor for research and internationalisation. "I am particularly proud of the important nature of their work and the way in which they are contributing to solving some of the most crucial challenges facing our continent.

"In order to make significant scientific progress, we need to draw scientists from the full diversity of our population. Young women such as these give us great cause for optimism about the future."

To the finalists and winners, Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor made a rousing call: "Promote science. Promote young women's interest in science. Help us to bridge that gender gap that continues to be a blight on our society. Let us ensure that no

woman feels that she is left behind in science and technology."

Dr Gina Ziervogel's research has always been focused on those most exposed and vulnerable to climate change and variability, from households to villages and at municipal levels. As the potential of climate change to compound and aggravate poverty becomes increasingly clear, her work has a crucial role to play in finding ways to respond to the impact of climate change, particularly in the context of African poverty alleviation and development.

"Almost by default, Gina's work has social impact," said Professor Mark New, pro vice-chancellor and director of the African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI), who nominated her for the award. "Her research projects are generally done 'with' rather than 'on' people and communities, focused on practical issues."

This is evident in one of her current projects, called 'Flow': Fostering Local Wellbeing, a transdisciplinary research project led by the ACDI. The project supports a group of Flow Ambassadors – unemployed youth who play an awareness-raising role in adapting to climate change, mapping local resources and making videos of municipal services, local businesses and other stories to engender interest in the richness of their local towns. Alongside this is the development of a community currency – a regionally based money initiative that supplements the national currency system, matching unmet local needs with unused local resources.

Ziervogel commented: "To me this is a really exciting project because it brings together the local community, the informal economy and the local municipality, to look at how they are developing and supporting adaptation to climate change."

In the next five years, she sees herself developing her engaged scholarship by working collaboratively with these different groups to find innovative solutions.

"One of the things we need to do in addressing the goals of environmental sustainability and reducing poverty and inequality is looking at transformation. What are new ways we can do things? What are new ways we can challenge the status quo and the current policies and ways that we work so we can be more collaborative and inclusive and address risks more holistically?"

She was an exceptional scientist, said Professor Susan Parnell, producing world-leading high-impact research with African as well as South African reach, as evidenced by her P rating from the NRF.

"Specifically, her work lies at the core of the global development agenda and brings science to bear on issues of eradicating extreme hunger, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development. Ziervogel has carved a position as a strong leader in an important and growing field.

"The applied nature of her work means she has a powerful public profile. Policy makers and practitioners know her globally as a careful and systematic researcher who is making a major contribution to our understanding of how climate science is used. Given this year's theme of 'science for a sustainable future', I cannot think of anyone better deserving of this award."

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