

The Aussie scientist whose mission is to feed the world

Julie Hare *Education editor*



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“The potential is there, but you can’t eat potential.”

It’s a borrowed line that appears in the final chapter of [Glenn Denning’s new book \[http://cup.columbia.edu/book/universal-food-security/9780231197618\]](http://cup.columbia.edu/book/universal-food-security/9780231197618) that neatly encapsulates his approach to addressing one of the world’s most complex problems: feeding a planet of 8 billion people healthy and nutritious food while protecting the environment for current and future generations.



Colombia University professor in development practice Glenn Denning is changing how the world deals with food security.

“I had this epiphany when I was writing the book during COVID-19 that I knew what was needed to transform the global food system, but it doesn’t happen by chance. There are no miracles. It happens because people change the ways they think [<https://www.afr.com/world/asia/india-key-in-recipe-to-avoid-global-food-crisis-20230820-p5dxye>] and act and have the skill sets and motivation to go out and essentially be the agents of change,” said Professor Denning, who has been awarded the prestigious Global Australian of the Year Award for 2023.

“We have the know-how, we just need the do-how.”

The Brisbane born and raised agronomist has been working on improving the world’s production of high-quality, high-yield crops such as rice and wheat since the 1970s, when he helped turn around rice farming in the Philippines, then Cambodia, then across the globe.

For the past 14 years, he has been the founding director of a master’s program at Columbia University [<https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/communities-connections/faculty/glenn-denning>] in New York that focuses on development practice. It is there that each year, he teaches the next generation of brilliant and driven young people who will take on the mantle of changing the world for the better.

“I call them agents of transformation,” Professor Denning told *The Australian Financial Review*.

“My students are elite. They have to be to get here, but they are the leaders of the future.”

Six hundred of his former students now work in 80 countries delivering pragmatic solutions to local communities.

Food security is arguably one of the world’s most wicked problems. Food production is the single largest contributor to carbon emissions – a giant 30 per cent – while half the world’s population, or about 4 billion people, is either malnourished or over-fed.

“There are 150 million children in the world under the age of five who are stunted because of malnutrition. Their future is entirely compromised; they have limited education and income potential.

“That strikes me as completely unnecessary. We can actually solve that problem.”

The key, he said, was in setting ambitious goals, being well-informed and building unlikely alliances across various sectors to create meaningful solutions.

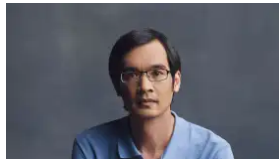
Johanna Pitman, chief executive of Advance Global Australians, said Professor Denning exemplified the idea of a groundbreaking Australian [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/leaders/why-this-maths-genius-refuses-to-work-for-a-hedge-fund-20220902-p5bew6>] who was selflessly working to improve the lot of billions of people globally.

“He has driven innovation, partnership and impact at every level, working with everyone from local farmers to global institutions and governments, to create lasting solutions to world hunger and malnutrition,” Ms Pitman said.

The Global Australia Awards recognise the contributions of the 1 million people who live overseas and the 2.5 million graduates of Australian universities.

Professor Denning described himself as a pragmatic optimist.

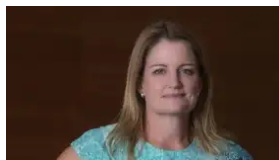
“The reason I’m an optimist is that you can’t afford not to be. And we can absolutely turn around global emissions and meet the sustainable development goals. There is nothing technically or financially preventing us from doing that.”



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