

## From the Chair – SEACO Scientific Advisory Group



**Ms Saira Shameem**

It is seldom in life that we get the chance to participate in the building of an institution. From its conception, SEACO has been a tremendous undertaking, requiring not only extraordinary vision, but also the skill of connecting various contributing actors in order to realize the whole, within a context of shifting variables and unknown terrain.

My journey with SEACO has been one of discovery, where the initial fleeting glimpses of what could be possible were slowly and methodologically replaced with a picture that painted a story of service, of individual lives changed, of the genuine selflessness of participating community members, of their ability to grasp the importance of their contribution to humanity, of the boundless energy, enthusiasm and commitment of SEACO's Director and Associate Director, of SEACO

staff who despite the most challenging personal circumstances became activists for the cause, of volunteers who were initially inspired by the idea and then went on to inspire others, of Board and Scientific Advisory Group members who had the knowledge and expertise to set and hold very high standards of performance, and of the growing appreciation of SEACO by the global research community.

There are many steps that a fledgling health and demographic and surveillance site (HDSS) takes, which are too easily dismissed as a matter of routine process. The implementation of the first census round and the initiation of the health round would not have been possible if local community engagement had faltered, or if sufficient support had not been forthcoming from various levels of government, or if the partnerships which established the financial and administrative framework for SEACO had fallen short of being adequate. There was also a significant technological 'back-end' that needed to be built, in order to support those on the frontline and ensure data security and confidentiality. The time and effort taken to explore, adapt, convince, trouble-shoot and train all the people in the SEACO eco-system in order to enable a successful roll-out of the obvious and necessary components of any HDSS, is greatly under-appreciated. As the out-going Chair of the Scientific Advisory Group, I am happy to say that despite considerable challenges, SEACO has not only been successfully established and become part of the reality of the people of Segamat, it has started to contribute back to society, both locally through embedded projects, and internationally, with the strengthening of the research platform as a result of the completion of the census, its first update round, and the start of the health screening round.

My own personal measure of whether the work thus far has succeeded is in knowing that if we were to falter and disengage now, that loss will be felt by over 40,000 people, not because of the lack of any personal benefit, but for the vision and hope that drives all of them towards sharing intimate details of themselves for a greater, global good.

I would like to thank Professor Daniel Reidpath and Professor Pascale Allotey for initiating this visionary purpose, as it has brought meaning and value to us all, and will continue to do so for as long as SEACO exists.