

The Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR): revived and rebooted

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Abstract

In this article, the new Chair and Executive Secretary of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR) lay out their vision for the Forum in the new context defined by the European Commission's 'Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture' initiative, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) new Office of Innovation and the UN Food Systems Summit. Convinced that networking with initiatives in the global South is more important than ever in order to support countries and regions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with limited resources and under heavy constraints, they aim to revive the 'network of networks' (with

over 650 members from the global South) along the following lines:

- For and by small-scale farmers in the global South;
- Bottom-up instead of top-down;
- Innovation-oriented;
- Focussed on achievement of the SDGs;
- Value-based (fair).

Partnerships matter

It took many years for the global community to realise that global goals can only be achieved if actors around the world, from different constituencies, work

together as partners. To this end, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly, 2015) dedicated global goal 17 to implementing and revitalising global partnership.

However, the question remains *how* to partner? How to turn the traditional top-down approach into a bottom-up cooperation? The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has come up with an answer – the criteria for effective development cooperation – and monitors to what degree providers of development cooperation:

- respect the ownership of countries of the global South; and
- align their support to countries' policies and priorities (OECD, no date).

In agricultural research, bottom-up cooperation is unfortunately not often realised in the true sense. Agricultural research is still very much driven by a few big international players who often have their own agenda, while national agricultural research systems (NARS) are generally not very much involved (if at all) and farmers' organisations even less so.

This is all the more surprising since insufficient partnering with countries of the global South is a well-known problem and has been recently stressed again by the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS).

The importance of partnership has been known since GFAR was established by FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR) and the World Bank 25 years ago, with the mandate to mobilise all the stakeholders involved in agricultural research for development and to support their efforts to alleviate poverty, increase food security and promote a more sustainable use of natural resources.

This was rightly emphasised once more by the UNFSS last year. The Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UNFSS clearly states:

"We must support national mechanisms that develop and implement national pathways to 2030 that are inclusive and consistent with countries' climate commitments, building upon the national food systems dialogues. With the UN system and all relevant stakeholders, including the International Finance Institutions, private sector, and civil society playing a pivotal role in supporting country implementation" (UN, 2021).

So, if the UNFSS agreed that the *"follow-up to the Summit will build on existing efforts of countries and*

supporting organizations" (UN, 2021), what needs to be done in order to live up to this challenge of working in partnership – bottom-up instead of top-down?

There is no need to create a new partnership to bring together small-scale farmers, national agricultural (research and innovation) systems and other relevant actors who can offer diverse perspectives (including indigenous knowledge and science-based evidence). It already exists: GFAR is a network of networks with over 650 members from 13 constituencies in the global South including national and regional agricultural research organisations, farmers' and consumer organisations, youth and women's organisations, governmental and non-governmental, from the public, but also from the private sector, all sharing GFAR's vision and mission.

The network has huge potential. Much more can and should be done to achieve the transformation of agri-food systems as set out in the five action areas of the UNFSS (UN, 2021):

1. Nourish all people;
2. Boost nature-based solutions;
3. Advance equitable livelihoods, decent work and empowered communities;
4. Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stresses;
5. Accelerate the means of implementation.

Here we present our vision on what GFAR should be doing and how it should be done.

Our strategic vision

We would like to highlight our new strategic vision for GFAR's way forward. This will explain GFAR's capacity to establish its mission or purpose, to determine long-term objectives, to make a substantive analysis of our performance relative to other global agencies engaged in agricultural research and innovation, and to set parameters for growth and value addition based on Partnership Principles.

Our vision for GFAR I: What will GFAR be doing?

GFAR will facilitate collective actions – a GFAR Collective Action is a multistakeholder programme of work at national, regional and international level initiated by three or more Partners and prioritised by the Global Forum. GFAR aims to contribute in this way to the SDGs – especially to SDGs 1, 2 and 17. As GFAR Chair and GFAR Executive Secretary, we have the ambition to achieve this by making agri-food research and

innovation systems more responsive and equitable towards achieving the SDGs.

To transform agri-food systems, small-scale farmers need to be centre stage: their farms account for 84 percent of all farms worldwide, but they manage only around 12 percent of all agricultural land by area, and produce roughly 35 percent of the world's food (Lowder *et al*, 2021). This is the main result to be achieved by GFAR via the European Commission (EC) funded project 'Reconnecting the world: The GFAR Partnership transforming agri-food research and innovation for development impact' (EC DeSIRA & GFAR, 2020): farmers and communities are empowered at the centre of innovation.

To truly put small-scale farmers (especially female and young farmers) centre stage, they need to have stronger agency and voice (no symbolic action, no tokenism) to play their recognised role.

Establishing Partnership Principles as a global standard

In view of the importance of partnerships, we aim to establish Partnership Principles as a global standard. Having worked in the field of agricultural research for many years, we regret to say that a lot of agricultural research has not been done in a way that leverages and maximises partnerships of key stakeholders on the ground. The NARS often continue to be overlooked or marginalised by well-funded global / Northern agricultural research and development institutions. This is what we hear again and again from most of our members. Even though progress is being made towards collaborative research, this is not happening in a standardised or systemic way. Too often, local players who have better ideas on sustainability of the outputs and outcomes of such a research effort are not involved.

The transformation of agri-food systems can only happen if partnering with the most important actors, *ie* small-scale farmers in the global South and their organisations, becomes our standard *modus operandi*; and if everything else (research, innovation, extension, training and investments) focusses on them. This requires partnering with all stakeholders, and this is why GFAR was established. It is still – and maybe more than ever – its *raison d'être*.

Accordingly, the most important mission for GFAR is to connect its members with existing agricultural research endeavours, to cooperate and to complement, not to compete with them. This is why GFAR, together with the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) of the Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT), has developed Partnership Principles. The Partnership Principles are

derived from KFPE's original 11 principles of research partnership:

1. Decide on the objectives together;
2. Build up mutual trust;
3. Share information;
4. Develop networks;
5. Share responsibility;
6. Create transparency;
7. Monitor and evaluate the collaboration;
8. Disseminate the results;
9. Share profits equitably;
10. Increase research capacity; and
11. Build on the achievements.

This is perhaps the single most important thing that GFAR can do: to establish these principles as a global standard in order to ensure that agricultural research is conceived, designed, carried out and followed-up in partnership with the most important actors – small-scale farmers.

By applying these Partnership Principles to our own Collective Actions and to Swiss research projects, and then bringing them to global fora (such as One CGIAR), GFAR aims to facilitate the identification and stimulation of agricultural research and innovation by and for farmers, and to avoid agricultural research and innovation that is top-down.

An innovation survey

Innovation is the only way to tackle the huge challenges of poverty reduction and hunger. Innovation is about achieving better results, while maximising impact with fewer resources and/or different inputs. To make this magic happen, agricultural research and innovation need to be done more closely with the key actors, *ie* small-scale farmers.

One example of this comes from Palestine. When land and water had been taken away from Palestinians and agriculture had been reduced to 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), it was possible to launch innovative climate smart agriculture because the World Food Programme (WFP) prudently weighed people's constraints in the region to guide investment and partnerships. WFP worked with a local agricultural research organisation (Agricultural Research Institute in Jerusalem [ARIJ]), leading to the co-development of small-scale hydroponic systems which the poorest of the poor were able to run on their rooftops and in their backyards. These not only improved their livelihoods (food, income) but also their nutrition (because the

best produce to grow in these small-scale hydroponic systems is vegetables).

To find out more about the potential of, and constraints to, innovations on the ground, GFAR will undertake a survey among all its 659 members. This will complement an in-house survey, implemented last year by FAO. We are excited to see what we will find and we will follow up on our members' ideas through future Collective Actions.

Collective Actions

Based on needs and priorities previously voiced by our members, GFAR is currently facilitating two Collective Actions: a Collective Action on Forgotten Foods and a Collective Action on Inclusive Digital Agriculture.

The Collective Action on Forgotten Foods (GFAR, 2022a) has facilitated broad and intensive multistakeholders' consultations in Africa, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East, together with regional research organisations and their partners, in particular Association of Agricultural Research Institutions in the Near East & North Africa (AARINENA), Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI) and Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), supported by the Alliance of Bioversity International and International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and Crops for the Future. Thousands of actors from many countries have constituted novel communities of practices which converged on a shared perspective for the transformation of research and innovation systems – the Global Manifesto on Forgotten Foods (GFAR, 2021) – identifying the co-innovation steps needed for unleashing the full potential of traditional crops to make agri-food systems more resilient and nutritious. The scale and scope of this initiative are unprecedented and represent a big step forward on the global forgotten foods agenda, which now can rely on a comprehensive and consistent framework: the Global Forgotten Foods Plan of Action.

The Collective Action on Inclusive Digital Agriculture (GFAR, 2022b) fosters farmer-centric, multistakeholder activities leading to best practices and business models that empower farmers to play their important role as co-innovators in the design, governance and benefit sharing of digital agriculture solutions. The first activities started in Latin America and the Caribbean in August 2021 under a partnership between the Forum of the Americas for Agricultural Research and Technology Development (FORAGRO), the Confederation of Family Producers Organizations of the Expanded Mercosur (COPROFAM), the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition (GODAN) initiative and the AgGateway consortium of digital

agriculture solution providers. Activities are being planned in Asia-Pacific under a partnership between APAARI and the Asian Farmers' Association (AFA), while an inter-regional Task Force has been established under the auspices of FARA.

This year GFAR will engage in two other Collective Actions: one on Family Farming and one on Transformational Learning. The next one in the pipeline is a Collective Action which helps small-scale farmers to tackle climate change challenges. We are currently also considering a Collective Action on agroecology.

Our vision for GFAR II: How will GFAR be working?

To revive and bring GFAR to its full potential, we also aim to improve GFAR's way of working through in-house consultations and collective wisdom in order to best serve our members.

An independent evaluation and seven recommendations

An independent evaluation undertaken in 2018 (Engel *et al*, 2018) came up with the following seven recommendations on how to further develop GFAR:

1. Continue to empower GFAR's constituencies, in particular small-scale farmers, women and youth;
2. Improve the capitalisation of, and learning from, the results of Collective Actions;
3. Develop a more explicit GFAR strategy with a focus recognisable to all;
4. Make better use of members / partners: strengthen GFAR's presence in the regions;
5. Improve operational management, develop a *modus operandi* for identifying and supporting GFAR Collective Actions and develop a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework;
6. Develop a professional learning culture;
7. Engage better with FAO, IFAD, EC-funded Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture (DeSIRA) project, Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP) and other important stakeholders.

The revival of GFAR started in 2021 with the re-engagement of GFAR's governance bodies, that is, by calling meetings of the Steering and Executive committees, and the election of a new Chair and Vice Chair. In 2022, regional workshops will take place to re-engage with the partners and discuss the way forward in the coming years. Building on the evaluation of GFAR, the following seven recommendations are

being proposed to GFAR members and partners to strengthen the Forum.

1. We will undertake a survey and conduct regional workshops ('regional interactions') in 2022 to listen to, learn from and follow-up on the interests, ideas and innovations of GFAR's 13 constituencies representing all sectors in agri-food. We will partner with the Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD) on a systematic way to make the voice of young farmers heard and taken into consideration, while also aiming to move from a gender-sensitive to a gender-transformative approach.
2. We will institutionalise learning via a global debate series called 'GFAR Talks', via regular inter-regional exchanges and via decentralised knowledge hubs.
3. We are restructuring GFAR and its work on fewer but more powerful work areas focussing on 'putting small-scale farmers centre stage' (the 'what') and on 'Partnership Principles' ('the how'). We aim to be able to communicate in simple terms how GFAR adds unique value.
4. We are already engaging with our partners via regional workshops to see how best to decentralise GFAR. The aim is to relocate our main structure (as a 'network of networks') to the field; only part of the secretariat will stay in FAO headquarters in Rome to provide core support (facilitation, monitoring, evaluation and learning or MEL, reporting, fundraising support, advocacy, communication etc) and to tap into the expertise and experience of FAO.
5. We are working on improved operational management, on 'engagement principles' and on a MEL system which will make it easier for our members and partners to engage in Collective Actions and to monitor their progress.
6. We are keen to develop a learning and innovation culture which will be driven by innovative approaches and methodologies.
7. We are grateful to FAO for hosting us and to the EC for funding us. We are working to get IFAD back as a co-facilitator and funder and hope to be able to engage more intensively with CGIAR and other important actors for the benefit of small-scale farmers in the global South.

In addition to the above-mentioned recommendations, several other important things have happened, on which we also plan to reflect and act upon:

- GFAR is funded by the EC's DeSIRA initiative which supports actors around the world. We are not only committed to delivering as commissioned but also to join forces with other DeSIRA projects.

- We are excited about being part of the Office of Innovation and the Chief Scientist stream in FAO. This is a great opportunity for evidence-based work in an environment dedicated to innovation.
- The UNFSS Science Days held in 2021 offered a great new opportunity to engage with researchers across the globe and develop evidence-based policies.

Conclusion: from GFAR to GFAIR

The Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAR) turned 25 last year. We did not celebrate because we are busy reviving the Forum after a period of hibernation. This is worth all efforts given that we are a network of networks, and that networking with initiatives in the global South is more important than ever in order to support countries and regions to achieve the SDGs with limited resources and under heavy constraints.

Our credo for GFAR of the future contains the following key elements:

- For and by small-scale farmers in the global South;
- Bottom-up instead of top-down;
- Innovation-oriented;
- Focussed on achievement of the SDGs;
- Value-based (fair).

In order to reflect this new and more focussed ambition we will suggest to our members and partners (coming together in the GFAR Partners' Assembly scheduled to take place in early 2023) to slightly rename ourselves from GFAR to GFAIR (Global Forum on Agricultural Innovation and Research).

This would reflect that GFAR is not just committed to research, but also to innovation. However, just to add the letter 'I' is not enough. According to Harald Welzer not every innovation is progress:

"The fact that there are so many fewer victims of violence in modern societies than in the Middle Ages is not due to better weaponry or surveillance cameras, but to the state's monopoly on violence, and that is the result of social intelligence, not knowledge. Such intelligence must always be based on a normative purpose, and what then emerges is not innovation but progress. The fact that the concept of innovation seems to have replaced that of progress is no coincidence: for innovation does not need a normative reference, it is

already achieved when something is newer than something else, irrespective of the question of whether it needed renewal at all.” (Welzer, 2021: 26 – author’s translation).

Ergo: innovation is only progress if it relates to values. These are defined by the SDGs and by the Agenda 2030.

By committing GFAR to being ‘fair’ the rewording from ‘GFAR’ to ‘GFAIR’ would be doing both: acknowledging the importance of innovations while clearly binding them to a value-based approach. We are conscious of the fact that changing mindsets or perceptions is not easy and we are prepared to work on that front to make our mission for GFAR successful.

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