



Strengthening Linkages between Farmers' Organizations and Agricultural Research Institutions

Ola Smith, Marcelino Avila and Nur Abdi¹

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¹ Dr. Ola Smith is Executive Secretary, GFAR Secretariat; Dr. Marcelino Avila is Project Coordinator, Rural Development Division, FAO; and Mr. Nur Abdi (M.Sc) is Officer, GFAR Secretariat.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the agriculture and agricultural research sector has been confronted with complex challenges and changing development agenda. In the beginning there was the concept of food self-sufficiency, which although desirable, rapidly proved to be unattainable, and gradually yielded to another paradigm, that of food security. This initially put the onus on the sector to provide access at all times to adequate and quality food for a rapidly growing population, in order to ensure a productive and healthy life. As if this task was not difficult enough, two new dimensions were then added. Firstly, that this continuous access must be provided for, while not only maintaining but also improving environmental integrity, and secondly that the sector must contribute to alleviating poverty, through on-farm and/or off-farm income generation and employment opportunities.

A different type of paradigm shift is the progressive movement with the concept of technology transfer. There was an approach where technologies developed in developed countries are transferred for possible application by developing-country farmers who had no input into its development, and who more often than not operate under conditions characterized by a lack of access to inputs, land and credit facilities which render such technologies un-utilizable. Another variant of the technology transfer conundrum takes place within developing countries themselves, when scientists develop technologies which are then passed to be utilized by farmers and other end-users including extension services who had little or no input into their conception, development and initial testing.

The sector still has a long way to go to meet the expectations placed on it, that is, feeding adequately a growing global population and contributing to poverty alleviation while keeping an eye on sustainable resource utilization. Appropriate responses to this task have to be rooted in research and innovation processes that make use of both traditional and the newer knowledge systems. Accordingly a central role of demand-driven agricultural research and innovation system is to provide effective solutions or responses to the major constraints of agricultural and rural development, such as those related to policy and institutional issues, those related to technical production/productivity enhancement and resource management/ utilization, and those related to social and economic problems, such as access to land, water, and other required inputs.

These represent formidable and complex challenges that cannot be tackled by researchers working alone or even amongst themselves in multi or trans-disciplinary teams. They need to work across stakeholder groups and engage civil society organizations such as farmers and their associations, relevant NGOs, private sector groups such as processors, commodity and input traders, and other relevant civil society groups. Hence the concept of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) was born to bring together all of these stakeholders including researchers to work together in strategic alliances and cost- effective partnerships in order to benefit from the economies of scale that comes from pooling knowledge, expertise and other resources, to deal effectively with the triple scourge of rural poverty, food insecurity and the degradation of our natural resources endowment.

2. The Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR)

GFAR is a stakeholder-led and driven initiative whose goal is to facilitate exchange of information, access to knowledge, cooperation and research partnerships amongst a broad spectrum of stakeholders involved in agricultural research for development (GFAR 2003). Some of the salient issues that led to its founding in 1996 were highlighted above, those issues directly linked to its complex and fast changing agenda as well as the issues related to the sustainable development paradigm and evolving priorities.

Stakeholder Groups: The stakeholders collectively formulated a **vision** of the path agriculture should take in the near future, as well as a guiding **mission**. They also defined a set of **objectives** and **priority thematic areas of research** that will contribute to realizing their vision. The GFAR stakeholders comprise:

- Farmer Organizations (FOs);
- Non-Government Organizations (NGOs);
- Research institutions, i.e. a) National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) of developing countries through their Regional and Sub-Regional Fora, b) Advanced Research Institutions (ARIs) of the north, and c) International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs);
- The agri-business private sector; and
- The donors with commitment to the concept of partnerships with these stakeholders.

The Vision: GFAR stakeholders envision a progressive development of a multi-purpose agriculture that:

- contributes in a cost-effective and competitive manner to feeding the global population and alleviating poverty, through the generation and adoption of environmentally sensitive resource utilization technologies;
- is diversified, innovative and exploiting modern science and traditional knowledge;
- thrives on research outputs developed in a participatory manner by stakeholders working together in cost-effective partnerships built around the farmer-producer relationship; and
- stimulates long-term policy and political support to the research systems that produce such beneficial research outputs.

GFAR stakeholders envision that in the near future, by collaborating as equal partners, they will invigorate the process of generating adoptable and effective policy, technological and socio-economic solutions and alternatives for the progressive development of the type of agriculture envisaged above.

The Mission: The mission of GFAR flows directly from this visionary statement as it should be, and it is to alleviate poverty, increase food security and promote sustainable utilization of natural resources by mobilizing and supporting the scientific community and all other stakeholders involved in agricultural research for development.

Strategic objectives: GFAR stakeholders crafted objectives which, they strongly believe, will enable them to address their mission and achieve their envisioned goals. These are to:

- facilitate the participation of all stakeholders in formulating a truly global framework for development-oriented agricultural research;

- foster cost-effective collaborative partnerships amongst such stakeholders involved in agricultural research for development;
- promote the emergence of true National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), and enhance their capacity to respond to users` needs;
- facilitate and promote information exchange and knowledge sharing amongst its stakeholders, and
- advocate for and sensitize policy makers and senior managers to the need for a long-term commitment to and support for agricultural research

3. Why Strengthen Farmers-Researchers Linkages?

Farmers and their organizations are the main if not the only producers of the food required by the increasing global population be it in the rural or urban areas. Many farmers and FOs even in developing countries are diversifying and becoming active in several components of the agri-business chain, not only produce but also process and market commodities. In other words farmers constitute or should constitute the central element and focus of researchers and their institutions whose mandate is to improve this continuum of the production-to-consumption system.

Farmers generate and use knowledge, and are constantly experimenting to manage risks and improve their operations. They should therefore be the natural partners of researchers and their institutions for a mutual exchange and reconciliation of modern and traditional knowledge. Farmers and their organizations are the main actors responsible for using and translating formal research results into real life production systems (as opposed to sometimes unrealistic controlled and experimental systems) and natural resource management practices.

At the macro level, the rapid pace of globalization and trade liberalization are creating opportunities as well as pressures for change at all levels, particularly for putting in place appropriate policies, institutional capacities and business services, to ensure that the potential benefits will accrue to the farmers and producers. In the absence of effective response, the risks for the agricultural and rural sectors to be marginalized are quite significant.

The lack of effective linkages and understanding of their importance among researchers and farmers may explain the present low adoption of technology and minimal research utilization in agricultural production systems. There is a growing mountain of shelved, perfected yet unutilized research outputs, and there are large amounts of information getting tied up in journal publications targeted to peer groups rather than intended beneficiaries who rarely have access nor understand such publications. Yet, technology can solve many of the problems farmers and producers are facing today, for example the constraints to increasing production, productivity and adding value, ensuring sustainable agriculture and rural development, bridging the digital divide, and harnessing the benefits state-of-the-art innovations in the fields of biodiversity, genetic engineering, bio-energy and environmental services, just to mention a few.

Structural Adjustment, decentralization and restructuring programmes of the public sector of developing countries, driven by more liberal market economies and a stronger promotion of private sector initiatives, have drastically reduced the size of government, public expenditures and the ability of public institutions, which traditionally have been on the forefront of the provision of “public goods,” to continue to deliver information, training, research, extension and other services. Their lack of resources coupled with existing bureaucratic inefficiencies have left a conspicuous vacuum in providing these essential services required by farmers and farmer organizations, which to date the private and civil society sectors have not been able to fill.

Agribusiness approaches and models can play a major role in revolutionizing agriculture in development countries. Agribusiness is about a dollars-and-cents approach, entrepreneurship and enterprise development, value adding for raw materials through processing and packaging, income and employment generation through horizontal and vertical diversification in the agri-food chain. Agribusiness with integrated production and processing can provide stable and attractive markets for small producers (e.g. contract farming), large producers, employment for rural workers and landless people, and also economies of scale and bargaining power for all stakeholders in the production-to-consumption chain. Herein lies the potential economic, social and innovation roles of FOs to increase the farmer’s or primary producer’s share of the agricultural consumer price.

These are powerful arguments and compelling reasons for strengthening the linkages between farmers and their organizations, on the one hand, and researchers and technology-driven institutions on the other.

4. How to Strengthen Farmers-Researchers Linkages?

Designing effective and sustainable linkages depends on, but not limited to, the following several important considerations:

- a) The recognition and importance attributed to the need for linkage, such as whether the global research community recognizes the important role farmers could play in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whether donors or researchers truly appreciate the value of engaging FOs in the agricultural research process at various levels, and whether FOs feel they can add value to the processes of policy making, setting the research agenda or evaluating research results. The evolution of approaches based on successful experience and failures in the past couple of decades indicates the willingness of both researchers and research institutions not only to accept but to aggressively canvass farmers as partners. Perhaps farmers and their organizations may share the same perspective and interest.
- b) Although there is a consensus on the need for linkages between FOs and research institutions, there are concerns about the high transaction costs in implementing and sustaining sound and healthy linkages. Cost-sharing strategies are welcome because they spell-out what the expectations and commitments of each partner are. Sometimes, due to differing professional and personal priorities and incentives, there may exist petty

jealousies and threatening relationships which may constrain or slow down the effectiveness of linkages.

c) Partners must build their capacity for successfully managing linkages. If one of the partners is far weaker than the others, e.g. skills to debate and communicate one's perspectives and knowledge effectively, the relationship will not produce the synergy and benefits expected. This occurs frequently in farmer/researcher relationships. For FOs, it is important that farmers develop a capacity needed to network with other farmers at whatever level they are operating, to understand the roles of researchers in the technology development process and how to exert some pressure on issues of paramount importance to farmers, i.e. the advocacy roles.

d) Designing, executing and sustaining effective linkages are about creating a favourable environment, clarifying the principles, the roles and norms, and understanding and agreeing with the expectations and outputs that determine such relationships.

There is a wide range of tested mechanisms that could be used at different geographical levels to develop effective linkages between the groups of stakeholders. A good starting point is to understand the comparative advantage of each partnering group since well functioning linkages require that such relationships built upon existing strengths and specialized skills that are complementary in terms of achieving mutually desirable objectives. For example, the analysis of comparative advantage of research institutions and FOs may indicate the following strengths:

research institutions

technological expertise
global access to information
good planning/writing ability
knowledge/contacts with int'l experts

farmer organizations

large constituency (potential)
easier convergence on goals & priorities
capacity for large-scale implementation
knowledge/contacts with technology end-users

Identifying the priority needs or specific expectations of each partner is important for defining the type of linkage that would be desirable. For example, the FOs as one of the major stakeholders of GFAR stated the following as their priority needs (GFAR 2003):

- capacity building on leadership (for effective representation), on advocacy and policy formulation (e.g. reverse declining financial support) and on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (i.e. better communications and dissemination of information);
- effective extension so research results can be more accessible, user-friendly and more supportive/compatible with local knowledge systems;
- knowledge of new areas of research/ technology innovations, i.e. agriculture and energy (non-renewable and renewable sources and efficient use), agriculture and globalization, agriculture and health (SPS and traceability requirements for export of food and agric products).

In terms of policy needs, FOs at the same GFAR conference stated that they needed policies that would improve the enabling environments (i.e. macroeconomic, trade and market policies), increase access to resources, entrepreneurship and enterprise development, and create new options for production and income generation.

These are excellent opportunities for defining the specific objectives of the linkages and by deduction the type of mechanism(s) that could be employed to achieve such objectives. Table 1 presents a wide range of optional mechanisms, depending on the requirements of the intensity of the interaction (from just information sharing to true collaboration), the geographical scope of interaction.

Table 1: Identification of effective mechanisms and level of effort to address relevant objectives at national, regional and global scales

Type of mechanism	National	Regional	Global
Information exchange & sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Field days • Seminars • Fairs • Radio programmes • Internet communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study tours • Conferences • Internet com • Internet web-sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters • Internet web sites • Electronic conferencing and/or Forums
Coordination for synergy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic focus groups • Workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation fora • Workshops • Virtual learning centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conferences • Summits • Virtual learning centres
Contractual relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialized service provision • Extension & advisory services • Business arrangements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of consultants for specialized assignments • Contracting for specialized services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring international experts
Collaboration for mutual development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint ventures • Partnerships • Negotiated strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships • Staff exchange/secondments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships • Staff exchange/secondment • North-South or South-South “twinning” arrangements

5. *A Way Forward*

In recent years, global and national interest in Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) has grown along with the recognition of the dynamic, complex nature of the challenges facing rural areas and rural communities. As a result there is high priority on pressuring and accelerating policy/institutional reforms, technological change and livelihood improving options for the future. Developing countries are also often confronted with shrinking resources and dramatic demands to increase food security, to alleviate poverty and to conserve natural resources and the environment, criteria at the core of SARD (FAO 2002).

Both GFAR and IFAP can play a major role in these SARD programmes, which have identified a prominent role for FOs. For example, the SARD Initiative of FAO is working to build the capacities, to enhance food security, to reduce the vulnerability and increase the self-reliance of rural communities, organizations and networks to improve access to resources, promote good practices for SARD and foster fairer conditions of employment in agriculture. The major groups the Initiative works with include Farmers, Indigenous Peoples, Women, Workers and Trade Unions, Nongovernmental Organizations, Youth, Scientific and Technical Community, Business and Industry, and Local Authorities. In the context of the SARD Initiative, farmers through their organizations can have access, and *speaking for themselves* to the global commissions and linked to the follow activities of Earth Summit, MDGs, World Food Summits, as well as interactions with United Nations agencies and with bilateral and multi-lateral donors and agencies (FAO 2000, WSSD 2002).

In an effort of strengthening these linkages at the global level, GFAR Secretariat had recently established a GFAR Stakeholder Committee to advise the Program Steering Committee (PSC) of the pilot challenge program *Generation (GCP) "cultivating plant diversity for the resource-poor"*. The committee is made up of 14 substantive members three of whom are Farmers' Organizations representatives, two from each Private Sector and NGOs, and 1 from for each of the seven Regional Fora. The Committee will communicate the interests of various stakeholders including farmers to the above mentioned PSC, so that it could appropriately take into account the views, experience and perspectives of those stakeholders, in formulating the overall policies guiding the CP. Moreover, the committee will recommend measures to improve multi-stakeholder involvement, especially those from farmers of the South, in the implementation and review of the CP.

A major opportunity for developing effective linkages is through a GFAR/European Commission project designed to strengthen linkages between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)/FOs and National Agricultural Research Institutions (NARIs) for effective research for sustainable development (GFAR 2004). The Project will enable them to effectively participate in all aspects of national, regional and inter-regional ARD. Its basic premise is that effective participation in ARD at any level requires more than simply providing a seat to such constituencies in a collegial decision-making body at national, regional or global levels. It also requires the strengthening of these stakeholder constituencies, and the development of a multi-level system that ensures a close interaction between the local/national, regional/sub-regional and inter-regional levels. This close and reciprocal interaction between these three levels is the foundation of the development of a Global ARD Agenda.

This initiative consists of two components that will be implemented by the participating CSOs. The first component focuses on capacity building of participating FOs and NGOs involved in ARD in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and will comprise a participatory institutional self-diagnosis and needs assessment, followed by appropriate capacity building activities to address the diagnosed needs. Such activities may include: sharing experiences knowledge and information at seminars, workshops, and other group activities, formal and informal training programmes on project management capabilities including development implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects, communication and information sharing strategies and advocacy roles. The expected outputs of the needs assessment and diagnosis will include identified obstacles to effective functional linkages with NARIs, a prioritized set of needs and a recommendation of strategic approaches to address these needs.

The second component is aimed at reinforcing the involvement of the participating beneficiaries in ARD activities and decision-making processes at the national and regional levels. This may entail networking activities, information exchange and knowledge sharing, active participation in the ARD agenda-setting processes and the implementation of collaborative action-research activities supportive of regional research priorities and community needs.

A number of activities will be carried out to complement the above, to specifically establish or strengthen functional linkages between the participating CSOs and relevant NARIs. These include:

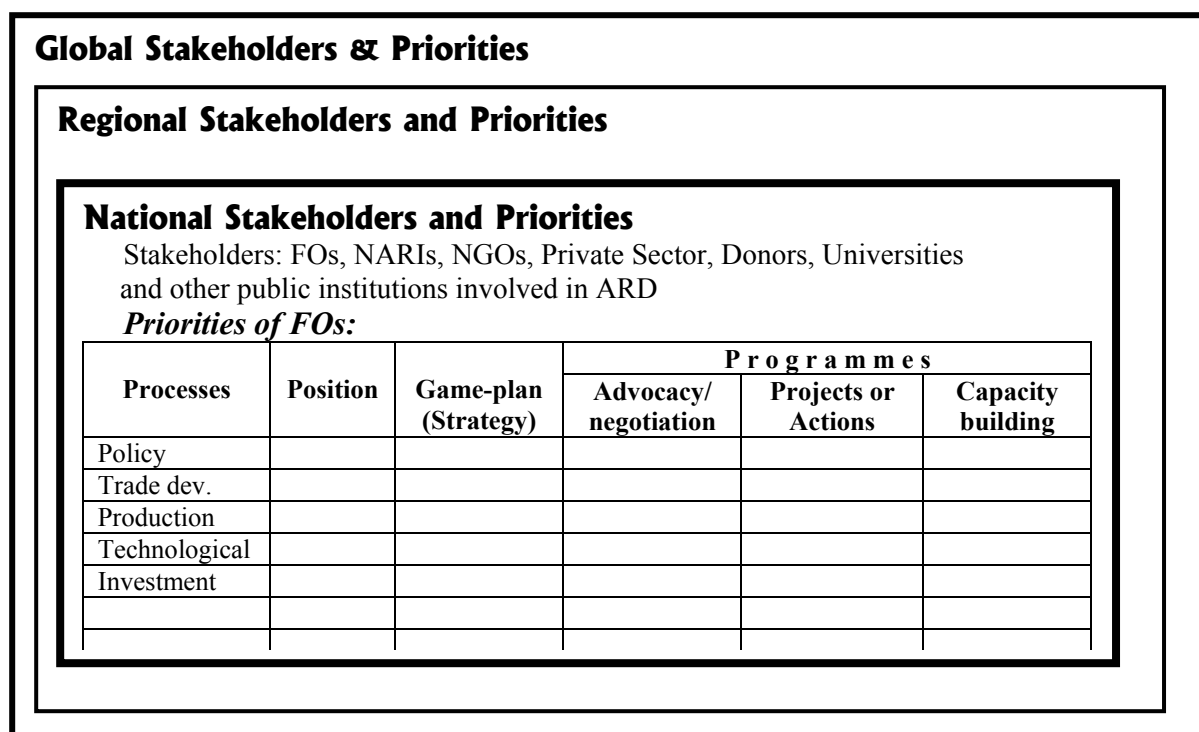
- Farmer-researcher collaborative research on priority thematic issues identified as regional priorities and on the exchange of outputs and lessons based on their experience and expertise. A number of pilot studies are to be carried out along these lines. In addition, participants (i.e. FOs and NARIs) will have the opportunity and will be encouraged to develop larger collaborative projects and compete for competitive grants attached to other GFAR programmes or projects.
- Through advocacy and financial support, the participation and involvement of FOs in various governance mechanisms and structures in ARD at national and regional levels will be pursued, so that they can contribute to decision-making processes at these levels. GFAR's experience in similar past activities will be useful in this regard.

The ultimate goal of the GFAR/EC Project is to contribute to the development of better organized and stronger FOs, capable of working and collaborating with research institutions, and taking their rightful place in decision making bodies where they can influence ARD activities at all levels.

For global and regional linkages to work effectively, the **national level** is so critical because this is where the major decisions in policy, trade production, technology development and investment, are taken and executed. Appropriately so, it is also at the national level that assessments are more relevant and meaningful for measuring progress in terms of achieving poverty reduction, food security and environmental sustainability. The framework illustrated in

figure 1 provides a practical approach that could be used to bring together all stakeholders at the national level including FOs to coordinate, implement and evaluate their positions, game plan and programmes. In this respect, the objective of GFAR is to promote and support each stakeholder group to work together with the others to clarify their positions, to develop a coherent and effective game plan, and to plan and implement their programmes based on the principles of comparative advantage, complementarity and subsidiarity.

Fig 1: Spatial scales and interfaces for defining GFAR stakeholder priorities and programmes



6. Concluding Comment

As indicated earlier, farmers are continuously experimenting to improve their productivity, using both traditional modern technologies available to them. They are therefore natural partners of scientific community, researchers and we need to develop sustainable approaches and strategies that will bring the two key stakeholders closer and develop functional linkages between them.

A number of other groups are working on the same problematique and testing deferent approaches. It will be useful to share the results of various initiatives, in order to reach our common goal of producing viable, adoptable and sustainable solutions to problems confronting farmers and their organizations presently and in the future.

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