

GFAR Regional Interactions – main insights and Member feedback

Introduction

GFAR Regional interactions are meant to reengage with Members and to hear from them to better understand their goals/needs and support them accordingly. The interactions also aim at spurring discussion and increasing engagement between Members to establish common ground and facilitate/foster collaboration. They represented a great opportunity for Members to share their points of view, their thoughts and ideas but also address potential challenges they may face in their work, identify synergies among themselves, understand how they are intertwined with each other and GFAR, and contribute to defining GFAR's role to better support them overall. This is key when promoting and contributing to Collective Actions and other initiatives/projects on which GFAR is leading on.

A total of six Regional Interactions were held virtually between January and September 2022 for the Asia-Pacific region (28 January); Sub-Saharan Africa (28 April); Near East and North Africa (26 May); Latin America and the Caribbean (30 June); Central Asia and the Caucasus and Europe (30 September). The total number of participants was 107. Each Regional Interaction was recorded and facilitated by GFAR moderator Nathalie Dore. Participants' feedback, ideas and comments were gathered through lively discussions as well as by several polls that were launched during the Interaction that asked thought provoking questions aimed at spurring engagement and participation as well as measuring satisfaction. The results of each Regional Interaction were shared with all participants through the minutes. Attendees were then asked to review, edit, add comments as they deemed fit and give their final approval.

Below one can find the main takeaways of all the Regional Interactions grouped by topic – the document is meant to extrapolate key information, summarizing it and presenting it in a well-structured and clear way. For this reason, the paper follows a schematic, straightforward and simple format by using bullet points that encapsulate what was discussed during the Regional Interactions and mentions, in some cases, through quotations, participants' exact words/comments.

The paper is divided into the following sections:

- GFAR role as seen by Members (present and future)
- Empowering farmers and acknowledging the role of women and youth
- Joint Advocacy, Resource Mobilization and Partnership
- Decentralization
- Co-innovation and Digitalization
- Agricultural research, Extension and Innovation
- Collective Actions
- Discussing new key topics

GFAR role as seen by Members (present and future):

Participants invested a lot of time discussing the role GFAR plays today on different levels, by describing how they perceive it and how it impacts their work and mission/vision. They also came up with several ideas and comments on how they would envision GFAR's role in the near future by highlighting the most efficient and effective way GFAR could support its Membership and grow as a network of networks.

GFAR role as perceived by Members

- **Agenda-setting and cross-cutting global/regional facilitator** that identifies and prioritizes challenges to be tackled (a.k.a. **“problem prioritization”**)
- **Coordination instrument** that acts on a global level and leads on projects concerning its Members while also being an **incubator of new ideas/initiatives** (Oluwole Fatunbi, FARA: “GFAR is a coordination instrument that acts on a global level, but actions take place on the national level, and we need more coordination on that. We need to look at the different structures that exist in continents like Africa in which all the main actions are done at a regional level and then down to the many NARS... GFAR should lead on such project that concerns Africa.”)
- GFAR as a **laboratory through which best practices, know-how and capacity building can be shared** on regional/national level (Ali Al Lawati: “GFAR should show us through webinars and newsletters the experience of other regions in terms of innovation and agriculture and innovative approaches and methodologies. It would help small scale farmers who are just learning about the concept of innovation. This would also help youth and women in agriculture.”)
- GFAR as a **tool through which Members can expand their connections** and get in touch with even more organizations and NGOs to advance their work (Rida Shibli, AARINEENA: “Through GFAR we can expand our connections and get in touch with even more organizations and NGOs to advance our work especially in the NENA region – the smart agriculture initiative supports youth / women in entrepreneurship and facilitates / promotes higher education.”)
- GFAR as an association which consults and engages with its members while dealing with topics/initiatives the members will follow up on also in the field, thus making the discussion less intellectual/abstract and more concrete.
- GFAR as a **network which defends and speaks in favor of its members** while putting the most active/involved ones on the front lines hence giving them the floor – the goal is to empower people even with regards to the dissemination of information (in its region, in its website, etc.)

How Members envision GFAR's role in the near future

- **Work in a more systematic way while promoting data and knowledge sharing;** joint action through joint research/advocacy and digital agriculture.
- **Empower its constituencies** particularly small-scale farmers; improve the capitalization of and results of CAs.
- GFAR should help build stronger links among the Regional Fora and facilitate learning from each other.
- **Establish interconnected and interlinked agendas** while putting together capacities so to have a global vision and respond in a more efficient way to what happens on a local level (promoting grass-root participation) (Kojo Ahiakpa, Agribusiness Advisor: "When moving forward we should strive to be more coordinated and collaborative while focusing on the local level – looking for examples at grassroots organizations. So, our work should be more at a local level and not focus on research only.")
- Support more **standardized and participatory MEL**, with shared indicators/results
- GFAR and CGIAR should be more aligned to better achieve the SDGs.
- Engage more with Constituencies and establish strategic collaborations with key actors/partners such as YPARD.
- Strengthen the already existing linkages between GFAR and key actors in different regions like CACAARI, CASCADE and CACFRAS to better tackle global challenges like climate change – there will soon be a CA on climate action (several members are already interested in joining and contributing to it)
- GFAR as **the "liaison person" in Brussels** that would communicate and keep the network updated on topics such as agricultural innovation and research and draft/present reports linked to knowledge management.
- Lead by example while establishing a well-defined consultative process that considers and involves every Member and focuses on how to best complement each other's work by identifying synergies.
- **Lead on initiatives such as CAs** and help Members contribute in the most efficient way.

Empowering farmers and acknowledging the role of women and youth

GFAR aims at putting farmers center stage while highlighting the role women and youth play in the agri-food system. This implies that its policies, projects and initiatives are farmer-focused and aim to be more farmer-led. Attendees discussed several suggestions and recommendations that could help GFAR in achieving the above-mentioned goals.

- **Become "inclusive" by putting farmers at the center** in an active way in the design/co-design of solutions as well as in governance (Valeria Pesce, GFAR: the

word "inclusive" is key here since what we are trying to do is put farmers at the center in an active way in the design and co-design of solutions as well as in governance. Farmers often are not involved in the governance side, which affects how you manage and govern digital solutions.)

- **“Review the process of how we empower farmers** for a longer period than just 1 to 2 years while assessing where we should participate and support/complement the work of **Farmer Schools** to facilitate education.” (Nathaniel Don Marquez, ANGOC)
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- **“Shift the focus on farmers** (“farmers first”) while working with different partners (“multi-stakeholder”) in different locations but within the same framework.” (Norah Omot, APAARI)
- Establish clearly “where do we want to go and how we are planning on getting there since both farmers and researchers have different goals. Additionally, how do we know if we are succeeding or not – through different indicators?” (Norah Omot, APAARI)
- Focus on empowering farmers and small local communities while **clarifying what are the metrics used to better assess progress** and analyze results (Nathaniel Don Marquez, ANGOC: “In the case of the Asia-Pacific region there are two key aspects namely: securing lands and tenure security”)
- **Inform farmers on global challenges** like climate change providing them with real-time contingency planning that will help them adapt to the current situation.
- Ensure that small holder farmers have **easy access to funding**.
- **Small organizations still lack funding**, and few smallholder farmers are participating and contributing to the discussion (Sunil Simon: “We should promote farmer-led innovation since they should be the ones leading the discussion and bring them to the center of the debate. We on the other hand should provide a platform through which they can communicate and interact”)
- **Moving from gender inclusion to gender transformation** to better assist women in the agricultural sector (Ian Mashingaidze, FANRPA: “if we look at African agriculture, African women are the face of that agriculture, and this transition makes sense”)

Joint Advocacy, Resource Mobilization and Partnership

Identifying and further developing synergies with other relevant actors is crucial to support and contribute to GFAR’s mission/vision. Participants came up with several suggestions on how to address this and move forward.

- Resource mobilization is key to achieve GFAR goals – **human resources mobilization** can be deployed to work together by organizations like EFARD.

- The whole resource mobilization **process should be thought out collectively** and the steps on how to best contribute should be outlined clearly – once done, they should be channeled to and through GFAR.
- **GFAR products need to be well-thought out, concise and smart** to better inform policy makers since the attention span is very little and there is little time to read all online materials – e.g. GFAR could rely on the same platform the EC uses a capacity development platform on which one can post the results/outcomes of meetings/initiatives. This could also make GFAR’s work more visible especially in Europe and for the EC (some platforms have a dedicated “news section”)
- Regarding the above, having a platform with the purpose of only exchanging information is not enough – there should be real commitment from the side of the actors involved and GFAR could lead on this.
- Synergies with other key actors like FAO and their initiatives (e.g. food system assessments, 60 African countries, farmer fields schools, Dimitra clubs, the Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation, South-South secretariat) must also be taken into consideration
- Use an **action plan which other partners have developed and build upon that** (there might be synergies and resources to be used and support engagement toward youth)

Decentralization

GFAR strives to be closer to its Members. To do so, it is carefully looking into different ways to decentralize or regionalize. By identifying and implementing the right approach, GFAR aims at being present locally while providing customized support to its Membership. Attendees provided their input in a well-structured manner.

- As the Evaluation mentions one of the goals is to “strengthen GFAR presence in the regions” by enhancing and working with already existing initiatives/projects (Oluwole Fatunbi, FARA: "We need to look at the different structures that exist in continents at a regional level and then down to the many NARS ")
- Strengthen GFAR’s presence in the regions; **improve operational management; develop a professional learning culture** and finally **engage with key funders** and partners.
- Role of Regional Fora: they should be aware of everything that happens in the region; there is a need to harmonize efforts at regional level; GFAR should go through the RFs for ownership to be then taken at national level; several members said that they interact with GFAR through the respective RF.
- GFAR’s **Regional fora** is a key actor since **they represent a privileged channel** through which members interact with GFAR and among themselves.

- Since Regional fora have a strong presence in several regions it is good to have them with GFAR so that they can collaborate and GFAR can capitalize the learning and networks of the regional fora.
- **Understanding and working with national systems mainly through the regional Fora (RF)** (see Decentralization below) (Sunil Simon, SAFBIN: “Understanding and working with the national legislature system is especially important as well as having more institutions focus on small holder famers. We need more of this, especially in Asia.”)
- It would be interesting to establish a European-African axis and getting it involved in GFAR’s work.
- Follow a specific approach that considers the **principle of subsidiarity** and the **tradeoff between subsidiarity and capacities** – i.e. make sure that different stakeholders are engaged, have a **sense of belonging** and have the chance to develop their own capacity (this should be done at different levels: regional, national, etc.) while focusing on **developing foresight capabilities/capacities** which are needed in many regions like the African region (Oluwole Fatunbi, FARA: there is a trade-off behind subsidiarity, meaning that it’s necessary to develop responsibilities within the partners framework with the required capacities to implement projects effectively ... Hence, when we implement the subsidiarity principle, we need to make sure that the different stakeholders are engaged and have a strong sense of belonging and have the chance to develop their own capacities. We need to look at it in a balanced way)
- Focus more on the local level – **grassroot organizations** could be taken as examples – and implement a **more practical approach** (Hildegard Lingnau, GFAR: “things happen and take place locally, at a local level, and this is why we are so keen to decentralize and come closer to where the real action is taking place”)
- One of the main challenges is to understand how to link the many different actors and the ongoing efforts/projects.
- **“Set realistic targets** and be cautious in terms of how we proceed towards decentralization while implementing a more **regional-led approach**” (Nathaniel Don Marquez, ANGOC)
- **Building a network and connecting with other organizations** - the language barrier remains a big obstacle (Sunil Simon, SAFBIN: “One of the main challenges we face is building a network and connecting with other organizations. The language barrier remains a big obstacle and prevents us from engaging with potential partners and participate/attend key fora even though youth participation in our organization is on the rise.”)

Co-innovation and Digitalization:

Innovation has different faces and approaches. Participants shared what could possibly be the best approach and the most effective policies GFAR could implement to achieve its goals.

- Perceive innovation as a **never-ending process/improvement** while **focusing on extension services** (Maria Auxiliadora Briones, FUNICA: “Innovation is happening in our daily lives. It should be seen as never-ending improvement.”)
- **Institutional reforms** are crucial as well as **project-driven activities** (Bi Jieying, YPARD: “Collaborating with countries / governments is also crucial so I suggest we should focus more on project-driven activities.”)
- **“Farmers are already being innovative** and conducting their own research, therefore they can easily adapt to new adverse conditions. The main goal should be getting in touch with them and providing them with the necessary tools and materials (e.g., social media and digitalization) to **facilitate knowledge sharing and pass on the know-how**” (Hemanth Gowda, Karnataka Veterinary Animal Fisheries Sciences University, Karnataka, India)
- **Reducing gaps in inclusive family agriculture** thus being more family farmer friendly (for instance technological and digital gaps) (Fernando Lopez, CNFR, COPROFAM: Being family friendly is the reason of recent successes... There is an added value in trying to reduce the gap in case of digital agriculture or how we call it inclusive family agriculture.”)
- Implementing a **new technological approach while promoting digital agriculture** – this will surely contribute to attracting youth and making more people interested in pursuing a career linked to the agricultural sector (this new technological element could also be crucial for the transition to gender transformation)
- Identify per hubs a couple of events, one of which should be a sort of a policy dialogue/guidelines on issues identified by stakeholders
- Digitalization is key when tackling issues such as **knowledge access and knowledge sharing** as well as the ratio of agricultural researchers v farmers in a specific region - this would also facilitate and boost coordination and cooperation among different actors in the region (especially considering the issue of duplication) - digital tools can help **extend the reach of the few researchers** present in the region

Agricultural research, extension and education:

Today, there are several challenges that might weaken, ostracize and prevent agricultural research, extension and education from being further developed. Attendees came up with very interesting suggestions and potential solutions to the problem.

- **Low visibility and underfunding as two of the root causes** that might jeopardize agricultural innovation and research (Botir Dosov, CACAARI: “In developed countries 3% of the agricultural GNP is invested in agricultural research whereas in developing countries it is less than 1%”)
- Underline the **role agricultural research and innovation plays** and how it benefits countries if promoted and nurtured (Botir Dosov, CACAARI: “We also need to underline the role agricultural innovation plays and how it benefits countries if promoted and nurtured – both at a national and regional level.”) - **make Governments aware** and ensure that the sector receives the necessary funding
- Extension/rural advisory services should have a key role.
- **Universities and education systems** remain very relevant, especially in agricultural development and innovation and when dealing with and engaging with farmers (Alim Pulatov, EcoGIS : “Overall education and research and extension and innovation are all dealt with by professors – but we need a network of professors and universities to further promote and deal with such topics.”)
- **A network of professors/universities** to further promote and deal with key topics like smart digital agriculture.
- Education is a fundamental element of the so-called Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) which comprises also Research and Extension (the connection between the three is weak and showing ways to rebuild it is a key objective of the CA on Transformational Learning)

Collective Actions (CAs):

A GFAR CA is a multi-stakeholder program of work at local, national, regional or international level, initiated by three or more Partners with a particular focus on small-scale producers, women and youth. CAs are key initiatives that catalyze actions or advocacy towards shared, demand-driven development aims. As such, they play a crucial role in GFAR’s work as well as in the network’s overall. Participants thoroughly discussed CAs and the way to further develop them in terms of structure, efficiency and effectiveness.

- **CAs must target rural and small-scale farmers as well as young professionals** (Mohd Alajlouni, AARINENA: “The collective action on business development of small businesses among the rural areas needs to be levelled up while making farmers leaders in the business. A lot of guidance is needed - this will increase the number of employees and will reduce poverty and finally ensure that natural resources are used in a very efficient and sustainable way.”)
- CAs focus on agricultural research and innovation and are intertwined/interlinked but is there a **matrix of all the CAs** that shows this and how are all of them linked to the SDGs?
- Design and set up a **well-structured monitoring and evaluation system** which will include all CAs and have different indicators including those specific to the SDGs

(Dipayan Dey, SAFE: Monitoring and evaluation: it has to be standardized. Some elements still need to be brought forward to better inform farmers on issues such as climate change...”)

- There is a need for **more clarity on the rules of engagement in Collective Actions** as well as on which regions/Members are actually part of a CA (Valeria Pesce: “When CAs were introduced, they were designed to have a bottom-up approach. Each CA would then start/develop based on demand. The idea is to have three partners from three different stakeholder groups to start the CA – so there is a willingness to collaborate and put some resources together and make them available.”)
- CAs are also **a way to learn how to leverage involving small holder farmers** throughout the whole process in a participatory way – therefore certain CAs are laboratories through which GFAR can do just that while transferring best practices in Partnership Principles to the various regional and local Members (hence learning hubs are so important)
- CAs as **incubators for learning** and then transferring that generalized learning/knowledge to understand how to better involve local actors (grass-root participation and organizations)
- The outcomes/**results of CAs should be easily accessed and available** – GFAR should also keep track of progress so that the data can be included in the work of its members and disseminated by them through their channels.

Discussing new key topics:

The Regional Interactions also represented a great opportunity to discuss new and exciting topics such as climate change, biodiversity, forgotten crops, etc. Attendees shared their thoughts, ideas and insight. They also took the opportunity to make some calls to action and invite colleagues to come together and work towards addressing such topics.

- Learn how to **preserve biodiversity and resources in a sustainable manner** especially when thinking of climate change and the economic situation of many countries (Jesus Garcia, CGIAR: “Networks should come together and play a key role in responding and tackling such challenges while supporting and promoting knowledge, innovation and research”)
- Incentivise and **promote forgotten crops** by using them in **intercrops systems** in which they can accompany other crops (Luis Pocasangre, EARTH: “Coco, coffee, banana model are all strong crops can accompany and highlight such forgotten crops and this would greatly help them flourish. The main asset is their added value and their Nutritional value”) move to CAs section.
- A **new CA on climate action** which considers the results of a GFAR survey as well as other internal/external discussions will soon be designed and launched.

Conclusions

The insights, comments, ideas and suggestions gathered during the six Regional Interactions by this paper highlight GFAR's active participatory approach and how it interacts with its Members.

The six Regional Interactions held between January and September 2022, represented a great opportunity for GFAR to listen to its Members, to their goals, needs and struggles but also to identify potential synergies and possible new partnerships. As a result, GFAR grew, and keeps on growing, as a global network, as a facilitator as well as a knowledge and learning platform that best supports and connects its Members and Partners. By bridging information gaps while facilitating and promoting knowledge sharing and transfer, GFAR looks at the overall picture and thus gains an excellent overview of the current situation as well as of the main actors in the agri-food sector. Consequently, GFAR can enable and empower its Members by fostering new partnerships, spurring collective action to address global challenges, promoting key calls to action and identifying and implementing the best strategic approaches to maximize outputs/outcomes.

From the Members' point of view, the Regional Interactions were a chance to express their thoughts, comments, ideas and proposals as well as highlighting possible challenges they may face in their activities and providing useful feedback to the Secretariat for future reference. Additionally, they acquired a better understanding of how the network functions while reiterating their interest in participating in GFAR's Collective Actions. This also helped them identify like-minded partners that share similar goals and work in complementary fields, thus leveraging on existing synergies to boost their work.

The input collected during the Regional Interactions and summarized in this paper, is to be shared with GFAR's Steering Committee with the following goals in mind:

First, to better support GFAR Members by facilitating and fostering new strategic partnerships among them but also by identifying and addressing key challenges faced in day-to-day activities. As a result, GFAR will adjust its reach and action accordingly to implement tailored approaches on a case-to-case basis that would benefit the network overall.

Second, to follow the many suggestions offered in terms of structuring its work and redesigning its role to better suit the needs of its Membership and facilitate collaboration. This would entail carefully assessing its own strengths and weaknesses to leverage on the former and address the latter thus resulting in identifying its main priorities and consolidating its network.

In conclusion, GFAR has benefitted greatly from the six Regional Interactions that have paved the way to further developments, participatory approaches and innovative policies and solutions. GFAR's strength is siding with its Members and Partners pursuing the common goal of enhancing R&D in the agri-food sector while keeping farmers center stage.