



GFAR

GLOBAL FORUM ON AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
FORUM MONDIAL DE LA RECHERCHE AGRICOLE
FORO GLOBAL DE INVESTIGACION AGROPECUARIA

Consultation meeting to develop a common approach to agricultural research cooperation in the Mediterranean Basin

Rome, February 27, 2001

1. Background

The *Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR)* is an undertaking by all the stakeholders of agricultural research for development aimed at promoting cost-effective partnerships and strategic alliances among the key players involved in this area of research. One of the premises of GFAR is the conviction that knowledge generation and utilization is increasingly based on transnational research systems and networks in the globalized world of today. The mission of the Global Forum is “*to mobilize the various stakeholders that constitute the research community in their efforts to alleviate poverty, increase food security and promote the sustainable use of natural resources*”. In order to achieve these objectives, GFAR seeks to mobilize, through a highly participatory and bottom-up approach, the concerted efforts of all the relevant stakeholders: national agricultural research systems (NARS), international research centres (CGIAR), advanced research institutions in the developed countries, farmers’ organizations, NGOs, the private sector and donors. A very important step in this process is the building up and strengthening of the *Regional/Sub-regional Fora for Agricultural Research for Development (RF/SRFs)*, representing all the relevant stakeholders in the various regions of the world. Two such regional fora are the Association of Agricultural Research Institutions in the Near East and North Africa (AARINENA) and the European Forum on Agricultural Research for Development (EFARD). Similar fora have been established in the other regions of the world as part of the process of the collective construction of the Global Forum (GFAR).

The main actors in this process are the stakeholders themselves: the NARS of the AARINENA region and the ARIs of Europe. But facilitating agencies have played a catalytic role. FAO has played an important role in this process, at both the regional and the global levels. At the regional level it has provided a strong support to AARINENA since its inception through its Regional Office for the Near East (FAO/RNE). At the global level, FAO is one of the four facilitating agencies that has supported the establishment of the Global Forum and is the host institution to the GFAR Secretariat. This is one of the important activities FAO carries out in support of agricultural research for development. ICARDA, as a co-sponsor to AARINENA along with FAO and ISNAR, contributed to the AARINENA activities since its inception, including the organization in 1995 of the first NARS Regional Forum in the WANA region. More recently, ICARDA is providing AARINENA access to its sub-regional annual co-ordination meetings, in order to enhance both south-south as well as north-south cooperation through its research networks. Finally, the regional organizations have played a very important role, such as CIHEAM, ACSAD and AOAD.

2. Recent activities in ARD in the Mediterranean Basin

One of the modalities of cooperation that are being explored in the context of the Global Forum is that of seeking to facilitate *Region-to-Region interaction* with the support of the respective Regional Forum. For the Mediterranean Basin, this has led to a collaborative arrangement that is being developed between the European Forum on Agricultural Research (EFARD) and AARINENA in West Asia and North Africa (WANA). This initiative was first discussed at the meeting of the European Forum (EFARD) that took place in Wageningen in April 1999, and it has subsequently developed through the direct interaction among research institutions from both regions and through the following meetings that have taken place between the two Regional Fora, facilitated by GFAR:

- 1) In October 1999 the two Regional Fora met in Washington (at ICW-99) and agreed to develop a collaborative research programme that research groups from both regions could carry out, in order to address the development problems of the AARINENA region. They agreed to do so within the framework of the Global Forum, and the GFAR Secretariat was asked to provide support to this process, both in terms of facilitating the implementation of the regional strategy through the formulation of a Regional Framework for Action, and by favoring the dialogue between European and AARINENA researchers to promote the development of joint research projects that could be presented to the EC and other donors. GFAR, AARINENA and EFARD started to work immediately on the implementation of this agreement. The GFAR Secretariat provided support to AARINENA for consultants and for consultation meetings that were aimed at: (a) better focus the regional priorities that AARINENA members had identified; (b) formulate a *Framework for Action* for the next five years (2000-2005) that could help to implement the *Regional Strategy* for strengthening cooperation in ARD that AARINENA had adopted in 1998; and (c) initiate a process of facilitating the interaction among researchers from both regions, on the topics of common interest that were being identified.
- 2) As a follow-up to this agreement, the European Initiative for Agricultural Research for Development (EIARD) organized a one-day meeting in Lisbon on February 11 of 2000, where research managers from both regions discussed the preliminary results that were coming out of the process mentioned above, and agreed upon a timetable for the identification of areas of common interest and the development of joint research partnerships. The Final Report and the conclusions and recommendations of this meeting are available.¹
- 3) During the first six months of 2000 a group of consultants worked with AARINENA and with the directors of the national research institutions of the region in addressing the three points mentioned in point (1) above. Three important results were presented and adopted at the Beirut annual General Conference of AARINENA that took place on March 22-23, 2000: (a) an *AARINENA Vision 2025* that identifies the main challenges of the region and a vision for the future; (b) a Framework for Action to implement the regional strategy in ARD that had been adopted one year before, entitled "*AARINENA in 2000 and Beyond: A Framework for Action 2000-2005*"; and (c) methodological notes were prepared on how to facilitate the interaction between researchers from both regions in formulating joint project proposals (see

¹ See EIARD: *Final Report of Europe/AARINENA Meeting on Agricultural Research for Development, Lisbon, February 11, 2000.*

“Operationalization of the AARINENA Framework for Action: Report of the Working Group”, Beirut, AARINENA General Conference, March 23, 2000). These three steps provided the basis for the work that was then carried out from March to September in further developing proposals for both regional cooperation programmes among the NARS of the region, and possible collaborative research projects between European and AARINENA research groups.

- 4) An important stepping stone in this process was the *GFAR-2000 Conference on Building Research Partnerships* that took place in Dresden, Germany (May 21-23, 2000), where researchers from both regions had occasion to meet and to discuss areas of common interest. The main topics that have emerged from this regional priority-setting process, and that were discussed with many stakeholders at GFAR-2000, are summarized in the next point.
- 5) In this process of moving from *strategy* and *development priorities* to concrete *actions* and development projects, a very interesting regional research agenda has emerged that is generating concrete collaborative research proposals and joint research efforts. Without attempting a systematic summary (please see the “*AARINENA Framework for Action 2000-2005*” document mentioned above), it is important to highlight the main lines of action that have come out of this effort. The first one refers to genetic resources and biodiversity management in the region, given the importance this has for poverty reduction and for sustainable socio-economic development. The second line of action relates to natural resources management, which is specially important in a region of the world where water and soil management play such a critical role. The third line of action relates to R&D efforts that can strengthen the development of key commodity chains of importance to the region, such as date palm, olives, citrus, cotton and cameloids. One of the tasks that has been initiated is that of seeking complementarities and synergisms between the efforts of different actors or stakeholders in the region, as it is the case in the example of bringing together the FAO, the ACSAD and the AARINENA (NARS) initiatives on date palm. This is the type of synergisms and complementarities that a regional strategy and regional priorities should assure, in order to increase the effective use of scarce resources and given the increasing financial constraints that agricultural research is confronting at both the national and the regional levels. The fourth main area that is being addressed is that of strengthening the access to information and the information management capacity in the region, through the gradual development of the AARINENA Regional Agricultural Information System (RAIS). With the support of FAO/WAICENT and of GFAR, this system is being developed through the “*networking*” of the institutions in the region that have information facilities. In order to facilitate this, an AARINENA website is being developed with the support of FAO/WAICENT, GFAR, ICARDA and IPGRI, which will serve as the main platform in internet for this information system, in close interaction with the websites of the national and regional organizations that work in this area (*networking* approach). The NARS of the region and the relevant international and regional organizations met in Cairo in a meeting hosted by the Agricultural Research Centre (ARC) of Egypt, on October 2-4, 2000, to discuss and develop this proposal. There is a document available that describes the main components of the regional information system that is being developed.² It should also be pointed out that this concrete

² See AARINENA: “*A Regional Information System for the Near East and North Africa*”; Beirut, AARINENA Secretariat, October 2000. Also see the “*Minutes of the Cairo Meeting on the*

proposal is part of a broader regional information strategy in agricultural research that was extensively discussed among the various stakeholders in the region through a participatory process that included an expert consultation meeting held in Beirut in March of last year. Through this process of involving the national and regional institutions in the region the “*networking*” approach is being developed. Upon request, ICARDA is taking steps to initiate a new web site for AARINENA.

- 6) It should be pointed out that besides the direct involvement of the NARS of the region, of the two Regional Fora and of FAO and the relevant CGIAR centres (i.e. ISNAR, ICARDA, IPGRI), the *regional organizations* related to research and training have actively participated in this process. This is the case of CIHEAM, of the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD) and of the Arab Centre for the Study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD). Through their participation in these various meetings, these regional organizations have been contributing to the emergence of the Regional Strategy and the Regional Forum that is under development. For example, in the Beirut meeting of March CIHEAM made a very important contribution in terms of sharing with other stakeholders their experience in developing an *information management capacity* in their regional research networks (i.e. the questionnaires and approach they have developed). This refers to the formalization and systematization of the databases that many regional research networks have, but that quite often have to be systematized and integrated into larger user-friendly information systems, through networking arrangements that facilitate the flow of information and knowledge. This type of experience or approach is precisely the one that the AARINENA RAIS is seeking to generalize to all research networks in the region, including the ACSAD, AOAD, ICARDA and FAO (ESCORENA) networks and initiatives. In information management ICARDA is also playing a similar role to the CIHEAM one mentioned above.
- 7) In October of last year the two Regional Fora met again in Washington, taking advantage of the presence of key actors in this process at ICW-2000, to review the progress so far made. The main conclusion that was reached was that significant progress had been made in terms of identifying regional priorities, in terms of formulating regional programmes of interest to the NARS of the region, and in terms of identifying concrete opportunities for collaboration. The main elements for a *collaborative regional research programme* have been clearly identified and the groundwork for joint research projects has been laid. But one of the main pending obstacles to address is that of developing practical mechanisms to facilitate the *direct continuous interaction between researchers from both regions* that work in the priority areas that have been identified, so as to facilitate the emergence of joint research projects that can be presented to the project calls of interested donors. In order to move in this direction, the two Regional Fora decided to promote the development of a “*Virtual Forum of Mediterranean Researchers*” in the research areas that have already been identified as part of the process described above, that could be supported by a joint undertaking between EGFAR (the electronic Global Forum) and the AARINENA RAIS.³ A small follow-up working group constituted by researchers from both

AARINENA Workshop on a Regional Information System for West Asia and North Africa”; AARINENA/GFAR/FAO, October 2000.

³ See “*Minutes of the Informal Europe – AARINENA Meeting*”; Washington, October 26, 2000 (Rome, GFAR Secretariat, November 20, 2000).

regions and from regional organizations was established to promote the implementation of this idea. The first objective of the virtual forum is to prepare concrete project proposals jointly developed by researchers from both regions, that can be presented to the next INCO project call of the EC, that will be launched in March of this year. This joint analysis among researchers can also lead to providing an input into identifying the main topics/issues that should be reflected in the emerging Sixth Framework Programme of the EC. A second important objective is to promote the emergence of *virtual research communities* around topics/issues that are of interest to the Mediterranean countries. It was pointed out that CIHEAM Centers and networks as well as ICARDA regional programs and networks could provide an important basis for this emerging forum, along with the AARINENA, ACSAD and FAO (ESCORENA) networks.

- 8) In December of last year the Mediterranean Conference on Cooperation in Agricultural Research was organized by INRA and NAGREF in Athens (December 1 and 2). The objectives were very similar to the process that has been under development throughout most of 2000, as described above. That is, it was aimed at the identification of regional research priorities, at the development of research networks on topics of common interest, and at the establishment of a Mediterranean forum on agricultural research. In order to move in this direction four proposals emerged from this meeting. The first one is to organize annual meetings among the agricultural research institutions of the Mediterranean; the second one is to strengthen research networks in the Mediterranean Basin, probably increasing their number; the third one is to establish an association among the research organizations in the region with a secretariat to support it; and the fourth one is to establish an observatory on food production, food markets and rural development. It is interesting to point out that one of the specific dimensions that the Athens conference identified was the need to develop a *Mediterranean agri-food system*, that can help to strengthen the international market for the Mediterranean agro-food products, but within a multi-functional view of agriculture. Two concrete aspects that emerged from this discussion are those of: (a) the importance of the Mediterranean diet as an element to promote the marketing value of the Mediterranean products in the globalized world economy of today; and (b) the importance of cooperation in scientific research and technology in order to share information and strengthen the capacity of the Mediterranean countries on quality control, certification of origin, sanitary control measures and sustainable production practices. These two aspects are closely related to the development of the concept of an Euro-Mediterranean space, and the implications this may have for agricultural research. This approach is an important contribution that is coming out of the Athens conference. But it would be to the advantage of everyone if an appropriate coordination and complementarity could be assured among the various initiatives presently under development.
- 9) In January 2001 the EFARD Steering Committee approved a "*Framework for Action 2000-2002: Strengthening the Role of Europe in ARD Global Issues*", which is being used as a basis for developing concrete research programs with other stakeholders that work on each topic.

3. Objectives of the Rome Consultation Meeting

Given the high potential for collaboration and complementarity between these various initiatives, and the importance of assuring the possible synergisms that can mutually enrich them, several stakeholders requested the GFAR secretariat to organize this consultation meeting among the

interested institutions to further discuss this possibility and how to implement it. Within this general objective, the three specific objectives of the Rome consultation meeting are the following ones:

- To review the on-going and planned initiatives of the different institutions in terms of regional collaborative mechanisms for ARD.
- To brainstorm on the feasibility and the added value of developing a common strategy for ARD in the Mediterranean Basin.
- To explore how best to start formulating and implementing such a strategy and decide on preliminary steps to be taken.

The Rome meeting is conceived as an informal and open consultation among stakeholders of agricultural research for development in the Mediterranean region, in order to exchange information on the various ongoing initiatives and to discuss possible ways of further collaboration among them, seeking to assure the complementarity and the synergisms mentioned above. In fact, this is an important aspect of the functions that the GFAR Secretariat has been asked to play by the stakeholders of agricultural research who established it.

Dr. Michel Petit, a person who is fully acquainted with the environment of agricultural research and rural development in the region and in the developing world in general, has kindly accepted to be the Facilitator of the roundtables that will take place in the afternoon of the Rome meeting (see attached agenda). We hope that these roundtables will play an important role in achieving the outputs that are described in the next section.

4. Expected Outputs

Given the nature of the meeting and the very significant background work that has been carried out throughout this last year (see section 2 above), the Rome meeting will not get into a substantial discussion of research priorities and research requirements of the Mediterranean region. This would duplicate all the discussions and analysis that have already taken place in the meetings of Lisbon, Beirut, Dresden, Cairo, Washington and Athens, with the active participation of researchers and Directors of national research institutions from both regions (see section 2). The results of these meetings and the proposals that are being developed are available to everyone through the various reports mentioned above.

Brief presentations on these various initiatives and on the emerging proposals for action will be made at the Rome meeting by the respective institution or group, in order to assure that all participants share the same level of information. But the purpose of the meeting is not to get into a detailed substantial discussion of each one of them. The discussion should rather be oriented in terms of the three objectives mentioned above. Thus the importance of circulating this information to all participants prior to the Rome meeting. On the basis of this dialogue and exchange of views, the expected outputs are:

- a) A consensus on the need to develop a common strategy for ARD in the Mediterranean Basin, and on the value-added this brings to the various stakeholders involved. It is important to develop common perceptions of these advantages among the various stakeholders, as well as a clear understanding of mutual expectations.

- b) Identification of concrete steps to start implementing this strategy with clear responsibilities assigned to the different institutions participating in the meeting, and specially the role the regional organizations can play in this process.
- c) An agreement on how to develop together appropriate instruments for capitalizing on the various initiatives being designed and implemented. Concretely, how can ongoing efforts be combined in the development of a *Virtual Mediterranean Forum* for ARD? Is it possible to develop a close collaboration between the Observatory or Information Centre for Mediterranean agriculture and both the EIARD-InfoSys and the AARINENA-RAIS that are being developed as part of this process? Other similar questions and possible instruments or mechanisms could come up in the Rome discussions.
- d) Identification of how we can work together to make sure that agriculture and agricultural research are very much part of the national and regional agendas.

The tentative agenda that has been developed is attached. The many inputs and suggestions that we are receiving are being reflected in it. Any further comments or suggestions are highly welcomed.