

Fondation du dialogue Sud-Nord Méditerranée

GFAR-The Global Forum on Agricultural Research

***Rural communities, No longer left behind: Rural and regional  
development in the South and North Mediterranean and the new  
Neighborhood Policy***

October 4-6, 2015

**Opening remarks by Mark Holderness, GFAR Executive Secretary**

Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

GFAR is very pleased to co-organize this Congress, in partnership with the Foundation for South-North Mediterranean Dialogue and our other partners, addressing the vital issue of the renewal of rural communities across the Mediterranean. The Milan EXPO and its themes are a very pertinent venue for us to explore these issues. Truly, we can no longer afford rural communities to be ‘the left behind’.

The Global Forum on Agricultural Research is a multi-stakeholder forum, which brings together all those concerned with the future of agriculture and addresses the essential roles that agri-food innovation needs to play in this. The Global Forum works to ensure that rural communities, who often do not have a real say in determining their own futures, are given a clear voice in determining the future of agriculture and within this, the role of agricultural innovation in delivering change and opportunity.

Through participatory foresight processes and GFAR Collective Actions, the Global Forum seeks to explore and establish with rural communities what they desire of their own futures and then help them to define and understand what innovations are required to help achieve those aims. This means going well beyond agricultural technologies, to determine and address the underlying drivers of change in rural communities and societies themselves.

To these ends, GFAR and the Foundation for South-North Mediterranean Dialogue, with support from the EC, have over the last year and a half, catalyzed and funded four sub-regional dialogues. One has been organized in each of the four sub-regions of the Mediterranean Basin. These dialogues have examined the rural development challenges, and possible solutions, in each sub region. What has emerged has shown both the expected differences between cultures in each country, but also a remarkable degree of similarity in some of challenges faced. We know also that there is much cross-learning to be had between

societies and institutions South and North of the Mediterranean Sea, who face common challenges and have much to gain by learning from each other's experiences and knowledge.

This is, sadly, a time of particular conflict and crisis in the Mediterranean region. Since we began these dialogues, conflicts in the region have now come to result in a mass exodus across the Mediterranean Sea, demonstrating in the news bulletins and front pages of the world just how significant these issues are and how connected all our societies are in reality. This gives our processes over the next days a renewed urgency, making it all the more important to address the root causes of rural poverty that underlie so many problems in the region.

The "Arab Spring" has shown the urgency to act on these issues, itself being sparked by, among other factors, the knock-on effects from rural poverty, crop failure through drought and high food prices as key catalysts that triggered mass movements for major societal change. We need to reconnect the *culture* in agriculture, link to the values and drivers of rural communities and societies themselves in order to achieve change that is valued, trusted, sustainable and owned by the communities themselves.

Both South and North of the Mediterranean Sea, rural poverty is leading large numbers of rural people, particularly the youth, into mass migration from rural areas to urban, in search of new opportunity. In the absence of urban economic opportunity, the result is often displaced, unemployed youth, disillusionment, urban poverty and despair and resultant societal breakdown. It is thus critically important that rural communities see a future that can sustain their value and provide new opportunity, particularly for youth and women.

Despite local differences, there are of course many common challenges right across the region: water and soil management are a major determinant of agricultural success, particularly now they are at chronic risk from climate change. Alongside these, there are also many issues involved in ensuring poor farmers have effective access to markets, challenges of access to resources – land, credit, knowledge, inputs – and in addressing fundamental disparities in societies that can particularly disadvantage women, youth and the landless. Youth are of course our future, but here there is a need to really address the future *for our youth*, to understand what can drive change and find ways to deliver this. Rural women across the region will always be disadvantaged unless communities modify their systems, and societal attitudes, to increase their access to key resources such as land and inputs such as credit and advisory services.

Our processes over these three days also form part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD3). GCARD3 is a global process of dialogue to ensure that agricultural research and innovation play their best possible roles towards meeting development objectives. To that end, we are also exploring the agricultural innovation and associated investment and capacity needs of the region and examining in particular here how investments and programmes of the international agricultural research system, the CGIAR, can best add value to national capacities and processes of agricultural research, innovation and change.

Opportunities for change and growth are certainly not confined to agricultural production alone and we must look afresh at what can be developed through access to information technologies, in service industries, by value addition through food processing and through associated industries such as tourism and regional cuisines. This also requires infrastructural development, to attract investment into the rural areas and provide a viable way of life that can change the perceptions and value systems associated with rural life. In northern Europe, broadband access and infrastructure have enabled rural communities to become, in some cases the fastest growing parts of national economies. Why can we not emulate that success in the Mediterranean region, with growth that also captures the spirit of place and the heritage and values held dear by each country and province?

In developing effective solutions to the challenges of rural poverty and depopulation, we must develop and use an open and inclusive process, in which all can have a say, to examine what is required to ensure sustainable growth. These Mediterranean dialogues are proving a very good starting point in identifying challenges and desired future scenarios across the region. However, achieving these changes means identifying what communities are prepared to do to address these needs. Our words are just the starting point, they need to be followed by actions and processes, with clear time-bound steps agreed as a plan of action towards meeting these needs.

To succeed, it is clear that we will need collective actions, involving multiple partners and exploring all opportunities to create new opportunities and enterprise in rural communities, in agriculture and agri-food-based industries and small and specialist industries. None of us has all the answers to the huge challenges faced, but each of us holds a piece of the jigsaw of actions required for change.

This also means going beyond seeing rural communities in terms of their roles in food production alone, to explore what determines their resilience, often in resource-limited environments, their social values and environmental sustainability and their desired scenarios for growth – and what achieving these will mean in terms of innovations, changes and the policies and enabling environments required. A number of wider realities affect the equitability and future for rural communities, including land ownership, gender equality, social organization, the strength of rural institutions, transport and school/hospital infrastructure and support systems and capacities for collective/cooperative action.

The regeneration of rural communities thus means investing in change. It also means as a priority investing in youth, women and those who lack resources of their own, investing in a viable future for rural communities and turning ideas and innovations into enterprise and rural growth. We look forward to very productive discussions over the days ahead and to setting out a real and practical plan for change, that is relevant, effective and owned by communities South and North of the Mediterranean.