

Driving agricultural transformation in Africa: the promise of the Global NARS Consortium

Interview with Dr. Aggrey Agumya

Agricultural research and development in Africa face numerous challenges – from low productivity and underinvestment to climate resilience and food security concerns. With climate shocks, demographic pressures, and a need for economic transformation intensifying, Africa's research systems are at a crossroads. In this interview, Dr. Aggrey Agumya, Executive Director of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), explains how the Global National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) Consortium (GNC) could transform Africa's agricultural systems – and drive progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

Q: Could you explain what the GNC is and what makes it unique, particularly in your region?

The GNC is a platform designed to foster direct engagement and cooperation among national agricultural research institutions. Unlike traditional regional or sub-regional organizations, which often involve multi-layered and bureaucratic processes, the GNC enables countries to connect and collaborate directly, even across continents.

This direct link is essential. Existing systems can be slow and inefficient, which hampers the exchange of knowledge and resources. The GNC aims to change that – empowering nations to avoid duplication, share innovations, and accelerate agricultural progress. *Ultimately, the goal is to transform agricultural systems through meaningful, cross-border collaboration – especially South-South cooperation.*

Q: What gaps in the current agricultural research landscape does the GNC aim to fill?

The biggest gap is the lack of direct country-to-country engagement, particularly across continents. By facilitating direct interactions, the GNC allows institutions to share data, resources, best practices, and expertise more efficiently – filling voids that regional networks may not currently address. *Rather than replacing existing structures, the GNC complements them by creating a flexible, demand-driven space for targeted collaboration.*

Q: What are Africa's key agricultural research priorities, and how can the GNC help address them?

Africa faces serious challenges – low productivity, underinvestment, food insecurity, and climate stress. Productivity is the lowest globally, and hunger remains widespread. Research funding is limited, and many institutions lack the capacity to drive innovation.

Africa's research priorities go beyond production. We need to address nutrition and food safety, ensure inclusivity for youth and women, promote climate resilience, and strengthen value addition and market access. With the world's largest youth population projected in Africa, agricultural research must help generate income, create jobs, and reduce inequalities."

The GNC provides a platform to collaborate and adapt technologies from other regions while tailoring them to African realities. For example, a millet breeder in Senegal could tap into seed innovations from India to fast-track adaptation.

Q: Why is direct country-to-country cooperation so important for innovation?

Because it accelerates everything. *Real-time cooperation between researchers, policymakers, and institutions enables rapid sharing of scientific data, insights, and even genetic material* (germplasm). A coffee researcher in Uganda should be able to connect with peers in Brazil or Colombia through the GNC without delays.

Beyond the science, this cooperation enhances policy influence. When countries act collectively, they're more likely to secure investments and reform policies. It also opens commercialization opportunities, ensuring innovations reach farmers and agri-businesses more quickly.

Q: What challenges have you encountered in implementing the GNC?

Initially, some regional organizations resisted the GNC, fearing it might duplicate or compete with their mandates. This slowed early engagement. But through consistent dialogue and explanation – supported by advocacy partners like the Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation (GFAiR) – stakeholders began to see the GNC as complementary, not competitive. Eventually, 55 countries committed to the platform, recognizing its potential to strengthen, not replace, existing efforts.

Q: What tangible benefits can the GNC bring to farmers, policymakers, and institutions?

For policymakers, the GNC provides a unified platform for advocacy – enabling stronger lobbying for increased investment and policy reform. Countries can learn directly from transformative models, such as China's agricultural strategies.

For research institutions, it boosts efficiency. Nations with limited capacity can partner with advanced institutions, accelerating innovation.

And for farmers, the benefits – though indirect – are substantial. GNC-supported research can yield climate-resilient crops, improved practices, and better post-harvest technologies. These lead to higher yields, safer food, and more profitable, sustainable farming systems. The impact begins at the institutional level, but it's felt where it matters most – on the ground.

Q: How will the GNC contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The GNC helps countries with limited scientific capacity strengthen their research systems and apply knowledge effectively. Its contributions to the SDGs include: amplifying cooperation and advocacy – creating a stronger voice for funding and policy in food security, resilience, and sustainability; facilitating knowledge and resource exchange – allowing countries to learn from each other and scale successful practices; and strengthening scientific capacity – providing tools, training, and partnerships to increase productivity and sustainable resource use.

*Stronger research leads to better policies. Better policies lead to better tools, yields, and resilience.
Now is the time to act – because the future of African agriculture depends on it.*