

## ***The Global NARS Consortium: transforming agricultural systems across borders***

### ***Interview with Dr. Rida Shibli***

In a world grappling with the dual crises of climate change and food insecurity, the Global National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) Consortium (GNC) is emerging as a potential transformative force in agricultural research and innovation. In this interview, Dr. Rida Shibli, Executive Secretary of the Association of Agricultural Research Institutions in the Near East and North Africa (AARINENA), discusses the role of the GNC in addressing critical challenges faced by the region and beyond.

#### **Q: Introduce AARINENA and why it supports the GNC?**

AARINENA was established in 1985 and has since been working with NARS, the broader National Agricultural Research & Education System, private sector actors, civil society, and international organizations across the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region.

AARINENA is a staunch champion of the GNC because we see the consortium as a key mechanism to bridge gaps in agricultural research across regions. It enables countries in the NENA region and beyond to work collectively toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to food security, climate resilience, and sustainable agriculture.

#### **Q: How did the concept of the GNC emerge?**

The concept of the GNC evolved from years of collaboration among regional, international, and academic institutions. Visionaries like Dr. Ravi Khetarpal (Chair, GFAiR) and Hildegard Lingnau (Executive Secretary, GFAiR) played instrumental roles in shaping this idea. Their shared insight was the need for a global platform that brings organizations such as CGIAR together with development funders like the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the World Bank – with NARS.

The GNC's objective is to connect researchers and policymakers across regions, ensuring research findings translate into practical applications for farmers. ***Smallholder farmers – who are often marginalized – are at the heart of this mission. By aligning with the SDGs, the GNC is poised to become a global force in agricultural transformation.***

#### **Q: What makes the GNC a unique initiative in agricultural research and development?**

The GNC is unique in several ways. First, it fosters global collaboration, connecting researchers and institutions from both developed and developing countries for joint research, knowledge exchange, and capacity building.

Second, it engages directly with NARS – strengthening their role as central actors in agricultural innovation. ***Rather than imposing external agendas, the GNC empowers national systems to lead.***

Third, the GNC's approach is regionally tailored. For example, in the NENA region, priorities like water scarcity and climate change are addressed through technologies such as climate-smart agriculture and hydroponics.

Finally, the consortium emphasizes practical, farmer-focused innovation. ***The goal is not just research for research's sake, but real-world solutions that improve lives – particularly for smallholder farmers who form the backbone of agriculture in many regions.***

In short, ***the GNC is more than a network – it's a platform for innovation, knowledge sharing, and sustainable development.***

**Q: What are the priorities and challenges of the NENA region?**

The NENA region faces several interconnected priorities and challenges in agriculture. Water management is top of the list, with water scarcity demanding more efficient technologies. Climate change is also a pressing concern, driving the need for climate-smart practices. Supporting small-scale farmers through extension services, advisory programmes, and digital tools is critical.

At the same time, the region struggles with food loss and waste, accounting for nearly 30% of agricultural output. Market access, particularly value chain development and fair pricing, remains a challenge – compounded by fertilizer shortages driven by global conflicts. On top of this, limited funding and difficulties in engaging policymakers constrain research and development efforts. Bridging the gap between research and practical application remains an ongoing struggle.

**Q: How does the GNC address these challenges?**

The GNC takes a holistic approach. It fosters collaboration between researchers to scale innovative technologies and share best practices. It also invests in capacity building, strengthening the institutions that drive agricultural development across the region.

Innovation is key. The GNC supports incubators and startups that transform research into tangible solutions. Through policy dialogues and webinars, it engages governments to align national strategies with the consortium's goals.

Efforts to reduce food loss, improve value chains, and promote sustainability further amplify the GNC's impact. These integrated actions help lay the groundwork for resilient, inclusive agricultural systems in NENA and beyond.

Of course, real-world implementation is not without its obstacles. ***Adequate funding remains a core challenge for operationalizing the GNC in NENA and beyond.*** While enthusiasm for collaboration is high among researchers, limited resources slow implementation. To address this, the GNC is developing proposals, engaging regional partners, and working with GFAiR to identify funding sources. Policymaker engagement is equally critical, requiring consistent communication to align with national priorities. Despite these hurdles, regional support has been strong, positioning the GNC to make a real impact as these barriers are addressed.

**Q: How will the GNC contribute to transforming agricultural systems and advancing the SDGs?**

The GNC is positioned to become a leading force in global agricultural transformation. It enables the exchange of best practices, tailored to local contexts, and provides training programmes and expert consultations that empower stakeholders with the skills needed to drive change.

***Through farmer-to-farmer exchanges and strong extension services, the GNC ensures that innovations reach those who need them most.*** This practical, on-the-ground focus ensures lasting impact and improved livelihoods for farming communities.

Moreover, aligned with SDGs like Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Clean Water (SDG 6), Climate Action (SDG 13), and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17), ***the GNC is creating a new model for agricultural development – one that is collaborative, inclusive, and sustainable.***