



GFAR

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

Document No: GFAR/00/28

Distribution: Session 4

Date: May 15, 2000

GFAR - 2000
May 21 - 23
Dresden, Germany

***Strengthening Partnership in Agricultural Research
for Development in the Context of Globalization***

**EGFAR: THE ELECTRONIC TOOL TO CREATE A
GLOBAL COMMUNICATION SPACE FOR ARD**

Alain Derevier
GFAR Executive Secretary

Tel: (39-06) 5705-3413 • Web: <http://www.egfar.org> • Fax: (39-06) 5705-3898 • E-mail: NARS-Secretariat@fao.org

1. Introduction

Since its establishment, GFAR recognized that the development of an efficient Information and Communication action is vital for it to become a mature initiative. Its first goal among five major ones is to facilitate the exchange of information among its members.

The first operational GFAR activity that has been identified was the development of an efficient electronic tool to support GFAR Information and Communication activities. A first proposal for a GFAR website was endorsed by the GFAR Steering Committee (GFAR SC) at its first meeting held in May 1997 in Cairo. It has been named *EGFAR*, the acronym for ***Electronic Global Forum on Agricultural Research***. However, the GFAR SC also recognized the importance for GFAR to elaborate a dynamic Information and Communication strategy that *EGFAR* would be designed to serve, and that goes beyond *EGFAR*.

Formulation of a GFAR Strategy

In October 1998, the GFAR SC reviewed the formulation of the GFAR Communication Strategy and progress of the development of *EGFAR* as well. The main elements of the strategy were as follows:

- A one-entry point access that facilitates transparent and dynamic communication among GFAR members that insures equal access to, and permanent share of, institutional and scientific information on Agricultural Research for Development (ARD).
- An efficient articulation between the global and regional levels that avoid any information gap.
- To facilitate the access to, and use of, relevant IC technologies to all stakeholders, particularly the NARS Community and the end-users of ARD knowledge.
- To create an information continuum through improving the compatibility between advanced and more traditional IC technologies, and
- To complement existing activities and avoid duplication through coordination with the major organizations that already play a role in ICT at global and regional levels.

The GFAR SC considered that the last point regarding the coordination with existing initiatives as critical for the strategy to be established. It then mandated the GFAR Secretariat to launch a large consultation with the major organizations that develop activities on information management and dissemination. The consultation was held in Rome on March 29-31, 1999 with the support of FAO and the World Bank.¹

Recommendations of the GFAR-convened consultation in Rome (March 1999)

¹ Refer to: **Information Initiatives in Agricultural Research: Enhancing Global Cooperation**, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Consultation Organized by GFAR, with the support of FAO and the World Bank, Rome, FAO Headquarters, March 29–31, 1999

The meeting recommendations are to:

- Endorse the approach for the establishment of an enabling global framework for agricultural research information for development as a first step towards a Global Knowledge System in ARD.
- Recognize the key role the Regional and Sub-regional fora have to play in assessing the information needs of the different categories of end-users at the local, national and regional levels.
- Urge the NARS Secretariat to assist the regional fora in identifying and implementing priority actions in Information and Communications Technologies, specially in the formulation of regional information strategies or in the strengthening of Regional Information Systems.
- Consider that *EGFAR* should take the lead for the “observatory” and “forum” functions defined above and ask the GFAR Secretariat to explore, in consultation with all interested partners, how best *EGFAR* can fulfill these two functions. The participants also requested the GFAR Secretariat to identify options to host *EGFAR* in the medium term.
- Ask FAO to identify, within its WAICENT program, the normative constraints for effective information systems, and to develop, in consultation with all interested partners, a set of guidelines to improve information management and flows, as well as to provide a global facility to interconnect regional information networks.
- Encourage the participants to continue sharing best practices and experiences in knowledge management.
- Request that a progress report be presented at GFAR-2000 along with some concrete examples of best practices in knowledge management and of new partnerships in ICT.

The recommendations of the Rome meeting clarified the role that *EGFAR* should play in the global context, and indicated clearly how it should link with other global players such as FAO/WAICENT, CGIAR, CABI, etc. at global level and the emerging regional initiatives such as InfoSys or the NARS RAIS at regional level. Based on that clarification, the GFAR SC approved the structure and scope of *EGFAR* in October 1999 in Washington.

2- **Three functions for *EGFAR* to perform**

The GFAR SC agreed on the three major functions that *EGFAR* would have to perform to serve the GFAR Information and Communication strategy in a well articulated and complementary manner with existing initiatives. They are as follows:

- A *linkage* function to provide general information on GFAR action, and to facilitate interaction among the GFAR stakeholders;
- A *services* function that provides specific services to the ARD community such as schedule of events, a newsletter, etc., and
- An *electronic forum discussion* on topics of a particular relevance for international ARD co-operation.

2.1 - The linkage function: an interrelated system of ARD websites.

The *linkage function* is implemented as the *EGFAR website* that provides an *internet platform* with a one-entry point located at www.egfar.org. *EGFAR* is definitively not only a traditional-type website that provides information on a specific organization, but should rather be seen as a system of interrelated webpages on ARD.

The main *EGFAR* webpage (or Homepage) provides access to general information on GFAR organization, activities and results, and links to the *Master Webpages of the seven stakeholders* of the Global Forum: NARS, IARCs, ARIs, NGOs, the private sector, Farmers' Organizations and donors. Through these seven Stakeholder Master Webpages the reader can find information that relates to specific activities of each constituency in the context of GFAR and get access to a wide variety of webpages and information resources and services generated by the various ARD stakeholders.

The types of information that the *EGFAR* Homepage provides, relate to:

- a) General presentation of GFAR and welcome note.
- b) Information on GFAR activities:
 - Information on GFAR-2000.
 - Program of Action (activities being carried out).
 - Organizational structure of GFAR (Steering Committees and Secretariats).

The seven stakeholders Master webpages are still under development. While there is already a wide range of linkages established with GFAR members belonging to the seven stakeholder groups, information focusing on GFAR-related information specific to each constituency still need further refinement. The most advanced one is the "NARS Master Webpage" that has already developed a wide range of services on a pilot or mature basis.

To conclude, this first function is essential for the GFAR initiative to assure a transparent information and to improve a sense of ownership and an active involvement of GFAR members. It is obvious that it needs further development. However, it is also true to say that it has already played a critical role for GFAR members to actively participate in GFAR activities and for GFAR constituencies to legitimately emerge as organized transparent groups.

2.2 - Services to GFAR members

The second function that *EGFAR* should perform relates to a range of services to GFAR members that relate (1) to services directly linked to the GFAR action or (2) to emerging

services that are not already provided by other organizations and would be better developed by *EGFAR* as a result of its interrelated websites concept.

The first category of services will include:

- A *GFAR* Newsletter,
- A calendar of events,
- An “early warning” for forum discussion topics, and
- A Forum Library that gets access to *GFAR* documents, summary and conclusions of past electronic discussions, as well as information on, and linkages to, virtual libraries.

A second category of services will be progressively developed on the basis of assessed needs. A first need already identified is the one for an easy access to institutional profiles of organizations active in *ARD* through a multi-criteria search engine (Kiosk services). This service could include support to the creation of individual institutional profiles for organizations that would need help.

The *GFAR* SC has firmly recalled that such services should be developed only to meet assessed needs and should be based on recognized *EGFAR* comparative advantage to implement them.

2.3 - Electronic Forum discussion

One of the important functions of the Global Forum is to provide a platform where the stakeholders of *ARD* can exchange information and views on important issues that are of interest to them. This could be done both through conventional workshops on key topics of interest to them, as well as through electronic conferences that will be organized on specific topics. Some of these activities will be organized at the regional level, coordinated by the respective *RF/SRF*. In other cases, the electronic forum will be organized at the global level. But even in the latter case, the regional dimension will play an important role in the electronic fora that will be organized.

Therefore, while recognizing that *EGFAR* has no monopoly to develop electronic discussion groups, the *GFAR* SC also strongly believes that *GFAR* shall directly organize and manage electronic forum discussions on topics of global nature that are critical for international cooperation on *ARD*. *GFAR* has a specific comparative advantage and legitimacy to lead discussions that relate to strengthen international co-operation and develop a global research agenda on *ARD*. They concern topics in the followings main areas:

- Issues that are not yet consensual among the *GFAR* stakeholders groups such as optimal use of biotechnology, access to, and share of , genetic resources;
- Issues that increasingly impact the opportunities and modalities of *ARD* co-operation and the development of global research partnerships such as the increasing privatization of knowledge and technologies.
- Issues of interest to the *NARS* and their regional/subregional fora.

3 - EGFAR Governance

The implementation of the concept of *EGFAR* being an innovative system of interrelated websites and a multi-stakeholder internet platform, requires an adequate system of governance that guarantees simultaneously legitimacy of the decision process, equal ownership of, and opportunities for, GFAR stakeholders, and outstanding quality of developed products. In addition, complementarity with other efforts, and use of existing expertise, should be a priority for the implementation.

The above questions have been deeply discussed by the GFAR SC in Washington on October 1999, and the the following decisions were considered.

3.1 - Overall Governance

There was a strong consensus that only the GFAR SC would have the legitimacy to decide on policy issues and the direction for further development of *EGFAR*. It was also recognized that the GFAR SC is not able to devote sufficient time nor necessary has the relevant skills to elaborate the required technical orientations required. Then, the GFAR secretariat was given the mandate to monitor further development of *EGFAR* and asked to report to the GFAR SC on issues that relate to policy action and to partnership with other similar initiatives.

3.2 - An ad-hoc development committee to be established

While having given mandate to the Secretariat, the GFAR SC felt useful to consider the establishment of an ad-hoc committee to assist the Secretariat in its task with the following objectives:

- to advise the Secretariat on the evolution of relevant technologies;
- to assure complementarity with similar activities carried out by the main GFAR members organizations active in global information and communication areas according to the Rome recommendations, and
- to establish an operational coordination at regional level with the RAIS initiatives.

The composition of the committee is still to be decided. However, based on the above terms of reference, FAO, the World Bank, CGIAR, CABI or the US Agriculture Library are obvious candidates for the global level. For the regional level, each regional RAIS should be represented, whatever it is based on south or north region.

3.3 - Role of the host agency

This question of the agency hosting the *EGFAR* application is a critical one. The criteria approved by the GFAR SC for the choice of the hosting agency in the long run are the followings: The host agency should:

- have outstanding experience in ICTs activities,
 - be actively involved in the development of *EGFAR*, not a “passive” host,
- but also should:
- guarantee the autonomy of *EGFAR*, and
 - respect the GFAR decisions.

On its side, the GFAR should comply with the rules and code of conduct that apply to any activity carried out within the host agency.

Several options were considered, and after serious discussion, the GFAR SC has favored the FAO option. Not only that option meets obviously the above criteria, but the merger of the two Secretariats of GFAR into a unified GFAR Secretariat and its location at FAO adds sense to such a choice. Modalities of operations are currently being discussed.

3.4 - Possible decentralization for the implementation of specific activities

According to the recommendations of the consultation in Rome, certain of the activities related to the three *EGFAR* functions could be implemented not at the level of the central application, but in decentralized manner at the level of GFAR members, under the umbrella of the *EGFAR* governance. This is first the case for the RAIS initiative for activities of a specific geographical focus. Any decision should be endorsed by the GFAR SC that will ensure their compliance with the GFAR objectives and principles.

Conclusions

GFAR has now a clear Information and Communication Strategy established that contributes to create an enabling framework for a Global Agricultural Information System on ARD in partnership with other actors.

EGFAR, in that context, is the tool for GFAR to develop its contribution. It obviously needs further improvement, but has already made good progress. Further development should now rely on a clear governance and should benefit from active involvement of stakeholders. Long term alliances are still to be forged with the most important players at global level and the emerging actors at regional level.