

GFAR Position Paper on World Bank/European Union Concept Note: “Increasing and Sustaining Productivity in African Agriculture: the National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS)”

Preamble

GFAR fully endorses the World Bank/European Union (WB/EU) concept note focusing on increasing and sustaining the productivity of African agriculture. There is consensus that African National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) are in dire need of increased and stable funding support. Unfortunately even as African NARS are being urged to undergo major institutional and policy adjustments to more effectively and efficiently address the daunting challenges of fighting poverty, hunger and food insecurity, their budgets continue to be drastically slashed. Competitive research grants schemes as being proposed by the WB/EU concept note are relatively recent mechanisms being introduced to bridge the funding gap and offer a breathe of fresh air to African NARS. However, there are certain pre-requisites and safeguards to be borne in mind to ensure that competitive grant schemes are successful. Firstly the process must be seen to be transparent and open to all stakeholders, particularly those from non-public institutions and bodies. It should also be able to engender collaboration, guarantee that funded research activities are developed in as participatory a manner as possible, allow the conduct of excellent science and effective transfer of technology. Additionally, the less vocal and marginalised beneficiaries (i.e., farmers, women, local NGO groups) must occupy key leadership positions in governance and participate effectively in the decision making processes.

Comments

Below are a few suggestions and comments on selected issues in response to what is thought to be a well conceived and very thorough concept note.

1) Operationalization of the Competitive Grant process – suggest that the best practice paper detailing hands on experience of the SRO’s with competitive funding also take into the consideration/be cognisant of/learn from the vast experience of the International Foundation for Science (IFS). Because in as much as we want an open competitive grant system to capture the best scientific ideas, we also do not want to disadvantage the up and coming but inexperienced scientists. We should also avoid to skew the system such that it makes the stronger scientists/institutions stronger and relegates/to the detriment of the weaker scientists/institutions or the rest. There should systems to segregate/separate scientists by age (using some age criterion) and experience and minimum repetition/renewal of grants (criteria) to the same individuals/teams or institutions. The latter age distinction could be considered as limited input of the competitive grant scheme into capacity building.

2) Balance between support to technology development on the one hand and transfer on the other – The concept note suggests that grant scheme support technology development and limited involvement in dissemination. To my mind, with current thinking with respect to participatory processes, one cannot or should be stuck in the mindset of first having researchers developing technology and the extension/NGOs or partners doing the dissemination. The two should go together concurrently to ensure maximum success. Therefore, there should equal focus on both the development, transfer and even the application of technology. Involvement of grant scheme in the application of the technology is the surest way to guarantee impact.

3) There was major focus on what to do for the greater and more effective integration and synergy between the various levels of operation from local to national, to regional and sub-regional to global. The latter should allow us to capture the value added in that it should help to avoid duplication. For sustainability and increased funding of agricultural research in Sub-Saharan Africa, the flow of funding among the layers of research institutions at local, national, sub-regional, regional and even

global levels should be based on comparative advantage. The matrix below details the multiple functions considered essential and how they are assigned across levels:

LEVELS	FUNCTIONS			
	Design of Research Activities	Implementation	Monitoring & Evaluation	Resource Mobilisation
LOCAL (NARIs)	+	++		+++
NATIONAL (NARS)	++	++		+++
REGIONAL (RF/SRF)	++	+++	+++	+++
GLOBAL	++	Ø	+++	+++

There are four key functions leading to sustainability, efficiency and better integration of operations in the proposed new funding system, namely a) the design of research activities, b) implementation, c) monitoring and evaluation and d) resource mobilisation. All levels of ARD must be involved in resource mobilization. Additionally, the local (NARIs) to national level (NARS), there is dire need for advocacy at the political level for national governments to support the competitive grant process. There is no better leveraging mechanism than to point out that governments and supporting a process because they consider it important and so bilateral and multilateral donors should follow.

LOCAL (NARIs)

Design of research activities (strengths & weaknesses)

Accountability

Implementation of research activities

NATIONAL (NARS)

National Forum

Horizontal communication

Shared decision making process

Shared funds

Role of ISNAR ?

REGIONAL /SUB-REGIONAL FORA

Regional centre – support to South–South collaboration on agricultural research via regional organisations

Regional Development Banks

Advocacy role in resource mobilization

Mandate – a) valorise and not compete
b) strategic thinking on
c) coordinate

Cooperation and integration

GLOBAL

Advocacy role

Facilitation and coordination

No research implementation

Strategic principles: increased beneficiaries involvement (Civil Society & private sector); synergy between national, regional and global levels (regional integration)