

Backgrounder

Farming Systems and Poverty: Making a Difference

A Global Learning Opportunity

Rome, Italy

**International Farming Systems Association (IFSA)
with FAO and IFAD**

WHO WAS THE GLOBAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR?

The Global Learning Opportunity (GLO) of the International Farming Systems Association (IFSA) was held in Rome, Italy, on 12-16 September 2005. The GLO brought together development practitioners, educators, researchers, representatives of farmer and producers organizations, civil society organizations, private business and bilateral and multilateral organizations and development agencies. The purpose was to dialogue, analyze and propose strategies and options, building on the IFSA inputs to the ECOSOC Summit on Integrated Rural Development, to capture promising opportunities to attain the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those related to rural poverty, food security, gender equity and environment sustainability. Through sharing relevant experiences, success stories and constraints, participants focused on advancing development priorities, mobilizing resources, and forming alliances and partnerships, all of which lead toward *making a difference*.

The GLO offered opportunities for multi-stakeholder thematic panels and round tables, open space workshops, tools bazaars, initiation of alliances and partnerships and selected presentations on critical topics. The GLO was coordinated with the ongoing learning and exchange activities of the eight regional farming systems associations and groups of IFSA, as well as the other networks, partners and symposia.

WHAT WERE THE THEMES?

Overall challenge theme -- Farming systems and poverty: making a difference

“Farming systems and poverty: making a difference” combines the IFSA mandate with the title of the influential FAO-World Bank publication on “Farming Systems and Poverty: Farmers’ Livelihoods in a Changing World”, and reflects priority issues for major stakeholders. Some major thrusts for the Symposium included: mainstreaming of good practices, including the differentiation of knowledge and responses by different farming systems; partnership strengthening, including opportunities for creating new partnerships during the Symposium; and mobilizing resources for sustainable agricultural and rural development (SARD), including local, national and international investments. Other key contributions of the GLO were: improved CSO interaction with S&T community on SARD; greater contact lists for regional information exchange; enhanced local knowledge swapping, knowledge pooling and lesson learning; and local peer-to-peer communication for innovation and learning at national and local grassroots levels; and further collaboration between CSO, IGO, private sector and Governments.

The themes added value to ongoing dialogue and emerging issues on the effectiveness of development approaches and provided platforms and options for launching field-level actions.

Theme 1 -- Food, Agriculture and Rural Development Policies in a Globalizing World

The theme was a priority concern for many stakeholders in the context of globalization, structural adjustment, decentralization and privatization processes which have contributed to the reduction or even withdrawal of Government support from the agricultural and rural sector and the collapse of services to farmers. Farming systems practitioners can report exciting R&D work in the field, debate good practice and the 'State-of-the-Art', and demonstrate contributions to the World Food Summit and Millennium Development Goals.

Theme 2 – Trade and Market Linkages

From the pervasive impacts of increasing trade liberalization on farmers and consumers, lessons can be drawn and ways forward identified. One core element of this theme was farmer-market linkages within the context of growing concentration of agro-industry. A richer understanding is needed of the complexity of supermarkets and market chains for small producers and urban consumers; the impacts of pro-poor global trade agreements; the growth of local food systems; and the effects on food safety and quality. The synthesis of field experience on impacts on smallholder farming families, the rural poor, or the landless poor (what works; what does not work) would contribute to the identification of appropriate targeted policy responses (above).

Theme 3 -- Knowing and Learning Processes

Understanding how rural people learn and share experiences, in what context and learning infrastructure and with which tools has replaced the paternalistic client-orientation of rural development during the 1970s-1980s. One challenge has been to strengthen entrepreneurial capacity for peer-to-peer knowing and learning for better decision making in poor farm households in complex systems, based on experiences with local multi-stakeholder collaborative learning at the field level in SARD, NRM, marketing, demand-driven advisory and research services.

Theme 4 -- Development Strategies, Pathways and Synergies

Based on the characterization of farming systems and an understanding of their dynamics, differentiated context-specific development pathways can be identified around which multi-stakeholder alliances and public-private partnerships (e.g., CSO, inter-governmental organizations, governments, private sector, etc) could coalesce. A challenge is to foster and mainstream such targeted partnerships with guidelines, regulations and investment practices. Such alliances are required for managing landscapes from farms to catchments, intensification strategies, environmental services, landcare, conservation of the natural resource base and biodiversity, livelihoods diversification, conservation agriculture, eco-agriculture, urban agriculture, and linking mitigation, risk and response for vulnerable systems and populations, including HIV-AIDS.

WHO IS IFSA?

The International Farming Systems Association (IFSA) is a non-profit professional association built on the challenge *'to give voice to small farmers'*. IFSA comprises seven active regional associations or groups of professionals, i.e. Australia & the Pacific, Africa-East & Southern, Africa-West, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North Africa & Middle East and North America. Their membership represent various agricultural disciplines such as soil science, climatology, irrigation, agronomy, genetics, animal husbandry, aquaculture, economics, sociology and anthropology.

The IFSA mandate is: *"To move beyond doing good research to making a difference to the lives of small farmers' and the rural poor."* Our common vision is to see smallholder 'multiple services' farming systems as a basis for SARD. Our analysis indicates that such forms of agriculture can provide much needed solutions to societies concerns for the safety and quality of the food they eat, environmental pollution and natural resource degradation that agriculture causes, and reduction of rural poverty and food insecurity. The Association has strong links with CSOs, including those associated with SARD and farmer/producer associations.

WHO WERE THE INSTIGATORS?

The following list of IFSA Board Members and support groups assisted in developing the ideas behind the first IFSA Global Learning Opportunity.

Jeff Mutimba (Africa – Eastern & Southern) jeff.mutimba@africaonline.co.ug
Mamadou Ouattaram (Africa – Central & Western) ouattaram.safgrad@cenatrin.bf
VoTong Xuan (Asia) v.xuan@cgiar.org
Christine King (Australia & Pacific) christine.king@uq.edu.au
Sri Nadarajah (Europe) sri@kvl.dk
Sergio Pinheiro (Latin America) pinheiro@epagri.rct-sc.br
Nour Sellamna (Middle East & North Africa) sellamna@agropolis.fr
Sue Ellen Johnson (North America) sejohnson@smallfarm.org

Clive Lightfoot (President), clive.lightfoot@linkinglearners.net
Constance Neely (Networking), cneely@uga.edu
John Dixon (Information), john.dixon@fao.org
Doyle Baker (Animation Group), doyle.baker@fao.org
Patrick Caron (Animation Group), patrick.caron@cirad.fr
Marcelino Avila (Rome Working Group), Marcelino.Avila@fao.org
Christine HoldingAnyong (Rome Working Group), christine.holdinganyonge@fao.org
Thomas Price (Rome Working Group), thomas.price@fao.org
Doug Wholey (Rome Working Group), d.wholey@ifad.org
Ahmed Sidahmed (Rome Working Group), a.sidahmed@ifad.org
