

IFSA (International Farming Systems Association)

Vision and Mandate

Our association¹ was built on the challenge 'to give voice to small farmers'. Over the last three decades we have done much to bring small farmers into the research and development process; a large proportion of agricultural research now goes on in farmers' fields. We have greatly enhanced our knowledge of how small farm systems work. We have generated many new techniques on how they can be improved. Despite these achievements the numbers of rural poor keep rising. For all those farmers who have benefited from FSRE there are still more joining the ranks of the rural poor. Moreover, the size, quality and diversity of our natural resources keep dwindling. Reflecting on this brings pause to ponder on: our effectiveness, our boundaries for research and development work, and our capacities to speak to political leaders, policy makers, urban consumers, and agro-industry on to day's issues of multi-functional farming, environment, food safety, market liberalization, global trade, social inequality, empowerment, good governance and democratization. Out of our recognition of our own limits comes a new mandate to invigorate ourselves, the farmers we work with, and our association. A new mandate:

"To move beyond doing good research to making a difference to the lives of small farmers' and the rural poor."

To go along with this new mandate our association needs a new vision. The time has come to see what we are capable of, to see if we are up to the challenge presented in our new mandate. We must now ask ourselves whether we:

- *Can evolve to credibly represent to the world the concerns of small farms and the rural poor everywhere and the agricultural research and development workers who support them?*
- *Can be a point of reference for international development institutions, and the multi-lateral and bi-lateral aid agencies on matters pertaining to small farms and rural poverty world wide?*
- *Can play a role in the much needed negotiation between small farmers and urban consumers north and south, east and west on what farming should look like in twenty years time?*
- *Can be instrumental in leveraging trade opportunities for the poor in the rich world's markets?*

This is not to say that all members must now become lobbyists and advocacy workers. No. It is to say that the association must find a way for the research and development work its members do every day all over the world, to be informed by new end users in politics, in civil society, and in private industry. Moreover, we must find a way for our work to be heard at the global level, because it is at this level that livelihood opportunities for the rural poor are curtailed, constrained, or otherwise cut off. Yes, this is an ambitious vision. But it is at all levels, from

local to global, that we must operate if we are going to go beyond 'good research' and make a difference to the lives of small farmers' and the rural poor.

What then might some of our future work look like?

We will need to redraw the boundaries of our research to go beyond rural producers to include urban consumers, to go beyond the farm gate to include far off markets, to scale up beyond a handful of 'experimenting farmer groups' to experiment a larger agro-ecological and political units.

We will need to enhance relationships with farmers, improve how we learn from each other, support the strengthening of farmer organizations at grass root, national and global levels, support democratization of policy formulation and good governance, ensure greater equity in gender relationships, change institutional cultures towards farmers' control of public financial resources, develop protocols and processes to enhance the interface between farmers, researchers and extensionists.

We will need to better recognise the multi-functionality of farming, thinking about agriculture in ecosystems and in wider environments, thinking about urban consumer concerns of food safety and food quality, thinking about the interactions between farming, fishing, forests, and wildlife, thinking about farming and global climate change, and thinking about landscapes, countryside and the quality of rural life.

We will need to double our efforts in research on commerce, trade and market orientation, employing market chain analysis and supporting rural business development services, micro finance and rural credit schemes as well as encouraging 'partnerships' between rural producers, processors, transporters and urban consumers.

This list is not exhaustive, it does not for instance mention the impact of HIV/AIDS or the revolutionary role that modern Information and Communication Technology will play in expanding multi-stakeholder collaborative learning systems, but it does give a flavour of what areas of work our association should be addressing for us to move beyond doing good research to making a difference to the lives of small farmers and the rural poor.

¹The International Farming Systems Association and the regional associations of: Latin American RIMISP network, Southern and Eastern African Association for Farming Systems Research and Extension, West African Farming Systems Research Network, IFSA North Africa and Near East Group, Asian Farming Systems Association, Australia & Pacific Farming Systems Research and Extension Association, IFSA European Group, IFSA North America networks.