



**7<sup>th</sup> GFRAS Annual Meeting**  
**The Role of Rural Advisory Services for Inclusive Agripreneurship**  
**3-6 October 2016, Limbe, Cameroon**



*The Seventh Annual Meeting of GFRAS discussed the Role of Rural Advisory Services for Inclusive Agripreneurship. 150 participants representing different regions of the world participated in this meeting. Dr Mahesh Chander reflects on his participation at this event here.*

**THE CONTEXT**

The GFRAS has been organizing its annual meetings around some major themes every year in different continents. The 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, held at Limbe, Cameroon this year, was hosted by the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AAFAS), the sub-regional RAS network for Western and Central Africa (RESCAR-AOC) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Cameroon (MINADER). The World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) was the co-organiser of this Meeting.



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The objectives for this meeting were as follows:

1. Provide a comprehensive understanding of inclusive agripreneurship and its relevance for food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable development, and identify factors that influence inclusive agripreneurship.

2. Discuss the role of rural advisory services (RAS) and their capacities needed on the individual, organisational, and system level to strengthen inclusive agripreneurship, and provide recommendations on how those capacities can be strengthened.
3. Discuss capacity needs and define ways forward needed in general to strengthen RAS networks and fora for them to become successful players in agricultural innovation systems in their regions.

## PROGRAMME

### Inaugural session

Mr Henri Eyebe Ayissi Yaoundé, the Hon'ble Minister of Agriculture & Rural Development, Cameroon was the Chief Guest. He spoke on important issues having implications for agricultural development especially in Cameroon, while recognizing the role of rural advisory services in promoting agripreneurship. The inaugural function was followed up by a brief presentation of the meeting objectives and agenda and introduction of participants. Appreciably, the whole inaugural session was completed within an hour allowing more time for technical sessions.

### Setting the stage

The opening session was followed by the keynote presentation of Dr Merida Roets, Scientific Royets (PTY) Ltd, South Africa. She gave an excellent and inspiring insight into the concepts, characteristics, and need for agripreneurship through her crisp presentation entitled, "Rural Advisory Services: Facilitating Feasibility". She shared why agripreneurship is important, what constraints and opportunities rural people face with regard to agripreneurship, and what the role of RAS is, or should be. She clearly brought out the difference between projects and businesses, while emphasizing the need for enterprise development over the projects. She highlighted the concepts like profit motivation and importance of reducing transaction costs, need for creating value added market chains towards improving profits from the farm enterprise. The key message from her presentation was that RAS should decrease transaction cost and work to increase profit. This was followed by a panel discussion wherein, 4 panelists were quizzed about their views on agripreneurship in their contexts. They shared stories of those whom they



considered as successful agripreneurs and the reasons behind their success. The panelists also shared their views on scaling up of these experiences.

This session helped participants understand who the agripreneurs are and what agripreneurship stands for, effectively setting thereby the stage for further discussions on the issues concerned with agripreneurship and RAS. Once the scene was set in plenary session, the well-coordinated parallel sessions offered the opportunity to the participants to discuss experiences and evidence on the effectiveness of RAS in promoting agripreneurship and identify capacity gaps at different levels (individual, organisational, and system level) to improve and strengthen the role of RAS for inclusive agripreneurship.

## Technical Sessions

The following three parallel sessions were held:

### 1. *Individual capacity needs of RAS to strengthen inclusive agripreneurship.*

Three speakers including myself discussed the following:

- The role of RAS providers in strengthening inclusive agripreneurship and in doing so, how effective are they?
- What capacities, especially skills and competencies RAS providers need to become more effective in their role and how can they be strengthened?
- What are the opportunities and challenges that RAS providers face in this context and how can they be seized or overcome?

These questions were discussed in detail by the groups of participants who attended the respective parallel session once all three presenters finished their presentations. The summary from papers presented in the session and also the discussion followed was presented skilfully by Shaun Ferris (Catholic Relief Service) in the plenary session.

### 2. *Organisational capacity needs of RAS to strengthen inclusive agripreneurship*

Four papers were presented in this session. The papers presented addressed the roles RAS networks and country fora can play in enhancing

## Mahesh Chander says I found that...

- Agripreneurs are extra-ordinary farmers
- They crave the unique
- They create new opportunities or innovate new ways to do old things
- They are disruptive
- They don't just grow crops or raise livestock, they work to maximise profits
- They update methods, tools and people around them, they create new jobs!
- They put the **value** into value chains



## This is Not business as usual!

- Agripreneurs pose a challenge to many extension agents, especially those who focus on the traditional approach of giving lessons on basic capacities
- RAS has to be extra-ordinary in extension services to be relevant and helpful to agripreneurs
- Working with agripreneurs is a learning partnership!
- RAS can't just rely on production advice, extensions agents need skills to new skills to support value chains
- Most extension agents will need to upgrade their technical and soft skills training to become business advisors.
- To work with agripreneurs, extension agents can and should use their services strategically, as the aim is to speed up agri-transformation process and create growth and employment.



## Let's summarise some characteristics of an entrepreneur

- Identifies and take advantage of opportunities;
- Is always looking for opportunities;
- Thrives on change;
- Copes well with risk and uncertainty;
- Knows how to identify and take calculated risks,
- Is a creative problem-solver, enjoys making decisions;
- Establishes partnerships rapidly
- Is an innovator, always looking for better and more profitable ways to do things.



*Courtesy: Shaun Ferris*

inclusive agripreneurship. In doing so how effective are they with successful experiences shared. The participants attending this session also discussed what capacities do RAS organisations need to assume and become more effective in this role and how can they be strengthened? The participants discussed the opportunities and challenges RAS organisations face in this context and ways they can be seized or overcome.

### 3. *System-level capacity needs of RAS to strengthen inclusive agripreneurship*

The role of enabling environments for RAS to enhance inclusive agripreneurship was presented by four speakers in this session. Here again, intense discussion followed among the groups, who dealt with issues like the settings needed at a system-level to enable agripreneurship and strengthen the role of RAS in this. The system-level opportunities and challenges for RAS to promote inclusive agripreneurship and how can they be seized and overcome was also discussed in this session.

## Side events

Several side events were organized during the Annual Meeting. I could attend three of them, viz.

- i. Promoting inclusive pluralistic service systems, organized by FAO;
- ii. Supporting gender-sensitive service provision: FAO's Gender and Rural Advisory Service Assessment Tool, organized by INGANAES/FAO; and
- iii. Testing of the new Extensionist Learning kit: The Agricultural entrepreneurship module organized by GFRAS.

These side events were very well coordinated and it was a great learning experience for me to attend these side events. The side event on Testing of the new Extensionist Learning kit: The Agricultural entrepreneurship module was moderated by Hlamalani Ngwenya and had an elaborate presentation by Shaun Ferris. Shaun's presentation had a lot of insights on applying agripreneurship concepts under field conditions. The Agricultural entrepreneurship tool developed by GFRAS available in the GFRAS home page (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TX5SvS4IMRVG1udUpiTWJpX00/view>) appears to be one important guiding document, which could be useful for the practitioners aiming to promote agripreneurship in rural areas in their part of the world.



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## Field Trips

As part of the Annual Meeting, four full day and one half day field trips were organized. I joined field trip 4, which was about how cocoa farmers are organized into groups linking them to RAS and market. Each field trip group had one local organizer, one Red Cross officer, a team of two facilitators, one blogger and one volunteer. It was in fact an extension of the matters being discussed during the parallel sessions. Prior to leaving, the facilitators were briefed about their roles towards making field trips relevant, interesting and focused as possible. Each group was



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supposed to provide their feedback and learning experiences from the field trip in the plenary session the day after. These field trips provided participants with insights into RAS, agriculture and value chain developed activities in and around Limbe (which is also known as the Town of Friendship). The organizers had provided detailed descriptions of the field trips on the meeting webpage, at registration counter and meeting booklet so that participants could choose the trip of their interest. We ended the day with a social evening full of food, music and dance, which was very relaxing after a hectic day of long field trips.

## Share Fair

The GFRAS has been organizing Share Fair along with Annual Meetings traditionally. At this meeting too, 16 participants from different regions discussed and shared their new projects, ideas, field experiences, publications and materials on the latest RAS programmes during the share fair. The presentation of Mr Kirthiraj Siddapura M, Co-Founder, Focus Infinity, India on Digital



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Platforms for social and behavioural change in rural extension services was interesting. The participants also took great interest in the presentation of Fernando Landini, Sr Researcher, CONICET, Argentina, who made a presentation on “International Evaluation of rural extensionist / advisors conceptions of rural advisory services”. The presentation of Mr Luke Smith ICT & AgrieduTainment Officer, Why Farm, Trinidad and Tobago on “We help Youth Farm” was also an innovative one. The GFRAS activities were explained by Mr Lorenz Schwarz, Communication Officer of GFRAS. The Share Fare helped in exploring new ongoing initiatives by different agencies and how GFRAS and its regional/sub-regional networks progressed since the last meeting.

### Short Presentations

There were 18 short presentations of 15 minutes duration each including the time for discussions on projects and innovative ideas from all around the world. Appreciably, two presentations were made by the participants from the region (India and Pakistan). All the presentations, blogs on field trips and other materials from the meeting will be available at the Annual Meeting home page (<http://www.g-fras.org/en/annual-meeting-2016.html> ).

### Networking Session

This session was coordinated by Kevan Lamm and Alexa Lamm, wherein different regional and sub-regional networks of GFRAS evaluated their strength and weakness on five parameters, namely,



Organisational and Institutional Strengthening; use of ICTs, Knowledge Management, Policy Advocacy and Professionalisation. Each regional/sub-regional network also developed their priorities for the coming 12 months. For instance the AESA members (Rasheed, Mohammad Ali, Keerthiraj and me) identified professionalization of extension services as their most important priority for AESA.

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### MY IMPRESSIONS

**Participants, their participation & Presentations:** The meeting was announced well in time with a well drafted concept note on the theme of the meeting. Inputs were invited from the prospective participants world over. The organizers had set a limit of 150 participants, considering the logistics and possibility of managing the sessions effectively. The selection procedure for papers to be presented in technical sessions was apparently very strict, which could be understood from the fact that only 3-4 papers per session were allowed. Only 11 papers were presented in the three parallel session reflects the importance being given to the quality of presentations.



Kristin Davis, the outgoing Executive Secretary, GFRAS and Karim Hussein, the incoming Executive Secretary, GFRAS were felicitated during the Annual Conference

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The papers were chosen for quality, representativeness and relevance to the theme of the meeting. For the first time, I found that not only the papers were screened and evaluated but also the presentation slides were asked one month in advance for evaluations. I got evaluator's comments on my PPTs and I could modify/improve my presentation as suggested. This was an eye-opening experience for me and I am sure that many might not have experienced that PPTs are subject to external evaluation for good, of course. All the presenters were briefed a day before about the modus operandi of parallel sessions, which helped in improving the outcome from each session. Appreciably, the participants were so engaged and actively involved in discussions in all the sessions. This was something we rarely experience in conferences organized in our region.

**Side events, Share Fair and Short presentations:** Besides three professionally stimulating and technically sound parallel sessions, these provided a lot of opportunities to discuss selected themes in small groups and helped in obtaining more detailed information on ongoing interventions. These also helped in networking with several others who are working on similar themes or having similar interests.

**Time Management:** All sessions including the inaugural programme finished well within the scheduled time. Since the presentations were pre-reviewed for length and content, the speakers could finish well within time. I found this as an important aspect of this meeting as in many conferences in our region, time management is an issue given least importance right from the Inaugural function, where everyone has so much to speak even much beyond the objectives of the event.

**Social Media use:** The conference was well publicized using social media channels like Facebook, twitter etc. The photos from the meeting activities like presentations and field trips were posted in the GFRAS and AESA facebook groups. Important messages from the conference presentations were tweeted by the participants. The continuous visual presentations by Ms Nancy white and her tweets on happenings at the meeting were a big attraction.



### FINAL WORDS

To me, this Annual Meeting of GFRAS offered a wonderful opportunity for participants to explore, exchange experiences, discuss, and give recommendations on the role of RAS for inclusive agripreneurship. It provided the participants an opportunity to discuss the Rural Advisory Services in the context of Agripreneurship, which is an area new for many extensionists especially across developing world. I am sure like me, all others who participated in this meeting would have found this meeting professionally very enriching. I feel it is important to draw lessons from such international meetings to improve the situation back home. On the first day of this meeting, I wrote my blog (<https://blog.gfar.net/2016/10/07/everyone-is-talking-about-agripreneurship/>) saying I am going to be a little more enlightened by the end of the event. Yes, I could learn a lot more about inclusive agripreneurship which will be helpful in delivering my professional responsibilities with better insights.

Thank you GFRAS & IVRI/ICAR/DARE, Govt. of India for facilitating this learning experience.

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