

NL-CGIAR Conference Report

‘Partnering for Global Food Security - Advancing knowledge and innovation for food system transformation’

2 & 3 November 2022

On 2 and 3 November 2022 NWO-WOTRO celebrated the NL-CGIAR research programme and the partnerships within the programme with an online conference on *‘Partnering for Global Food Security’*. Researchers, policy makers, and stakeholders from companies, public authorities and NGOs from within and from outside the NL-CGIAR programme came together to discuss the research programme’s insights and outcomes and formulated their common narrative on agricultural research for development and peered into the future of smallholder farming in Africa.

NL-CGIAR conference day 1 – Farmers in the kitchen of co-creation

At the studio

It is the morning of the 2nd of November 2022. There’s only one hour left before the [NL-CGIAR conference](#) (see programme [Annex I](#)) starts and the organising team is working their heads off to settle the last details. The atmosphere is vibrating. Everyone is excited to be at this point, in this room, collaborating, creating, almost flying together. The clock keeps ticking, while the number of things-to-do seem to increase at a similar speed. But, we know that we’ve got this. We are communicating clearly and every person sticks to his/her task brilliantly. Then it’s suddenly time. Hold your breath, spotlights on. Let’s celebrate!

Gerrie Tuitert, the [NWO-WOTRO](#) coordinator of the [NL-CGIAR research programme](#), looks into the camera and welcomes the audience. What a remarkable thought that she is now connecting live with researchers, policy makers, stakeholders from the private sector and farmer representatives from around the world. **Wilma van Esch** (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and **Floor Boselie** (Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality) are also at the studio, both sharing their take on the importance of the NL-CGIAR research programme, its accomplishments and future prospects.

Opening session

Farmers need to be in the kitchen of co-creation

The conference moderator, **Amanda Harding**, takes the floor and announces the keynote speech by **Juan Lucas Restrepo** (CGIAR). He emphasises that, for food systems transformation, we do not only have to improve our science, but more importantly, improve our ways of conducting it. We need to co-create solutions for agricultural innovation and development within partnerships with national research systems, local universities, the private sector, civil society and off course with the end-users: farmers. According to Juan Lucas Restrepo, ‘Farmers need to be in the kitchen’, meaning that farmers should have, right from the start, a clear voice in the co-creation process.



Amanda Harding

A common vision, real collaboration and the government

Namukolo Covic (CGIAR), **Elizabeth Swai** (AKM Glitters Ltd.), **Jan Willem Nibbering** (Dutch Embassy in Burundi) and **Emma Naluyima** (One Acre Fund) take this new form of partnerships one step further and discuss the

biggest challenges for successful partnerships. Namukolo Covic boldly states that we are failing to deliver healthy diets to all localities in a sustainable and affordable way. For a food systems transformation, we need a common vision, which is then contextualised to local realities. Elizabeth Swai adds that, when researchers and stakeholders from the private sector have this common vision, business partners can start to ask the same questions as scientists. What then emerges is a blurred zone between disciplines and sectors where real, transformative collaboration takes place. Furthermore, as Jan Willem Nibbering argues, this common vision should be reflected by public policy. With that vision, governments should create space for all the actors involved in developing a sustainable and viable food system.

Flexibility

To achieve these new type (other than business as usual) of partnerships, Namukolo Covic states that we especially need flexibility in the way we collaborate. She argues that we should enter the collaboration open-minded to be able to address 'what if' questions, instead of coming to the table with pre-set questions. The advantage of being to answer 'what if' questions is that it allows decisions to be made in real time and link the questions to ongoing policy processes. According to Namukolo Covic, we are often limited to do so because funding calls come with a specific focus and do not allow much flexibility. The [Senior Expert Programme](#) in the NL-CGIAR programme was in that sense an exception, she argues, allowing the scientists to use of the policy levers. [Watch the video](#) of the panel discussion and reaction on it by Emma Naluyima.

Deep dive into the NL-CGIAR Synthesis Study findings

Food Fight on public-private partnerships

Before NL-CGIAR Senior Expert [Ken Giller](#) (WUR) and PPP-expert [Sarah Cummings](#) (WUR) battle out whether or not agricultural research can make a contribution to smallholders' livelihoods without engaging the private sector, [Ellen Lammers](#) introduces the [NL-CGIAR synthesis study](#). She explains that the goal of the synthesis study has been to get a better sense of the added value of the [NL-CGIAR research programme](#) in terms of new insights and knowledge gained and outcomes achieved throughout the different instruments. In addition to



Ellen Lammers and Amanda Harding

this, the synthesis study is also meant to facilitate and promote the actual use of the research insights. Ellen and her colleague [Daniëlle de Winter](#) (DBM Research) looked at all project outputs and publications, and conducted about 20 interviews with researchers involved on public policy towards food system transformation, smallholder diversity in agricultural research for development, and public-private partnerships in international agricultural research. Those themes formed the basis of three [papers](#) and three associated [Food Fights](#).

Before the final of three Food Fights, on public-private partnerships ([watch the video online](#)) starts (aired for the very first time on this conference), the audience is asked to take a stance. About one third agrees with the statement and thinks that agricultural research cannot make a contribution to smallholders' livelihoods without engaging the private sector. Let's see whether our debaters can convince them to vote in their favour post-debate. Sarah Cumming's throws out the 'killer argument' that farmers are in fact the private sector. Nevertheless, the second vote does not show a major shift in people agreeing/not agreeing with the statement. Apparently there is also consensus on Ken Giller's argument that the private sector cannot solve everything. *(Please note that Sarah Cummings and Ken Giller are not expressing their personal opinions; they have been requested to take a side in the debate, so the audience gets a clear overview of the dilemmas and arguments).*

The future of smallholder farmers – an armchair discussion

If you thought it was time to sit back and relax after such a fiery conference element, think again! Because now NL-CGIAR Senior Experts **Conny Almekinders** (WUR) and **Erwin Bulte** (WUR), take their seats in two blue and apparently comfortable chairs for another round of conversation: the [arm chair discussion](#). They explore the balance between resources and attention going to smallholder diversity and resources and attention going to markets. Because for the smallest of the smallholders, markets are still failing, and these farmers always seem to be at a disadvantage. To make a point, they take us 20-30 years ahead and ask the question: what is the future of the smallest of smallholders? Talking about radical food system transformation and the SDGs, for a large number of those small smallholder farmers, Erwin Bulte hardly sees a future in the countryside for them.



Conny Almekinders and Erwin Bulte

‘But what about their culture, their livelihoods?’ asks Conny Almekinders. ‘There is value in that.’ Yet, Erwin Bulte argues that we need to think out of the box. Instead of locking farmers, even those who currently are able to ‘hang in’, in an unsustainable system – rapid population growth with further decrease farm sizes - we should ask ourselves what kind of structural transformation paths exists. According to Erwin Bulte, the real challenge and structural transformation lies in what will happen with the labour source that is freed up.

Who decides?

But who decides how the future of smallholders looks like? This the first question that comes up in the Q&A, for which **Ken Giller** also takes a (virtual) chair. **Conny Almekinders** and **Erwin Bulte** not only argue that there is a tremendous responsibility of governments for the future of smallholders, but that it is a shared responsibility between governments from the North and the South. They come up with transformative approaches such as migration, or governments implementing trade tariffs as possible solutions. Yet, they also argue that policy and research are connected. Science contributes the views on how viable smallholder livelihoods will be in the future, and it is expected that politicians will respond to that. Ken Giller adds that agendas shouldn’t be set by large international foundations, but we should instead focus on the demand of local farmers.



Amanda Harding and Ken Giller

And the alternatives? Can we jump straight to services? Or the agro-processing industry? Erwin Bulte and Ken Giller both mention that, with public interference to develop those markets, there might also be alternative futures that focus on agro-commodities serving domestic and regional markets as well as an agro-processing industry.

In a wrap up of the entire synthesis session, **Marja Spiereburg** (Leiden University) also directs us towards the responsibility of states and, echoing Conny Almekinders and Erwin Bulte, international responsibilities. She argues that what happens in the global South, very often is the result of policy decisions in the global North. Combining this point with Ken Giller’s earlier point, local demands should also be part of international policies. [Watch the video](#) of the armchair discussion, including Q&A with Conny Almekinders, Erwin Bulte and Ken Giller and the wrap-up by Marja Spiereburg.

Poster session

Posters and questions

The final part of the first conference day comprises the poster session during which (mostly junior) researchers present their respective projects through a three-minute pitch. All five parallel session are well visited. This is the first time today that presenters and attendees get to interact. They are eager to answer and re-ask questions, eager to connect and exchange. If only we would have had more time. Hopefully, attendees will be able to find each other after the conference and continue the synergy.

NL-CGIAR conference day 2 – An interdisciplinary community demonstrates a model for action

Dialogue for global food security

Dialogue sessions and key messages on food systems transformation

The thematic sessions of day 2 of the [NL-CGIAR conference](#) opened up space for dialogue among the community of NL-CGIAR researchers – who work on a wide range of topics within the global food security spectrum. Prior to the conference, their respective work was grouped into four different subjects, following the four knowledge domains the [NL-CGIAR research programme](#) was built upon:

1. Food systems for zero hunger
2. Inclusive and resilient value chains
3. Inclusive access to seeds
4. Sustainable, inclusive and resilient agriculture.



In each of the two dialogue rounds, the attending researchers discovered communalities and formulated an inspiring set of key messages. Those were based on the actual outcomes of one or more individual NL-CGIAR projects, or resulted from collectively reflecting on the research they had done and what that meant for reforming or transforming food systems. The key messages were grouped per cross-cutting theme (Partnerships; Equality; Enabling & scaling; and/or Systems approach). One of the key messages that came back with several of the cross-cutting themes was the involvement of governments. Governments should play a key role in research partnerships and their involvement should be carefully designed, whether it be at programme, country or project level. Also the systems approach, which stood central in the [NL-CGIAR research programme](#), was reflected on in many of the key messages and showed great interconnectedness with the other cross-cutting themes. With scaling for example, we should anticipate societal and environmental trade-offs beforehand and scale on different levels. Some other key messages echoed ideas or statements that had been explored during the first conference day: a comprehensive common vision, supported by an ambitious strategy is needed rather than ad-hoc policies of interventions. However, we should never forget to actually link the top level vision with local realities and always be aware that a common vision translates differently in local realities. The full list of key messages can be found in [Annex II](#) (see below). Visit the [online dialogue board](#) of the NL-CGIAR conference and/or visit the [PDFs](#) with the dialogue per thematic session.

Wrapping up for global food security

Pulling out red threads - with a call to action for science

Mario Teddy Asio (Ministry of Agriculture, Uganda), **Øystein Botillen** (Yara) and **Domenico Dentoni** (WUR) continued to pull out red threads of the thematic sessions in a panel discussion, reflecting on the critical role of science to create the common vision on food systems and again showing us how interconnected the cross-cutting themes in reality are. Øystein Botillen, for example, sketched a picture of how the political debate is affected by history, culture and current politics in countries, as well as by emotions and ideologies of the people involved. He therefore argues that science should absolutely be engaged in transformative partnerships to create a common vision based on a rational assessment, and bring in a systems view to assess trade-offs. When Dentoni talks about scaling, he asks the question whether we scale solutions or approaches for local adaptation of solutions. He argues that research projects should



Amanda Harding

certainly budget and plan for the latter, but that scaling solutions is more a responsibility of governments. And when we talk about adaptation of solutions, can we also do this inclusively? For example, by using citizen science not only as a means to receive information, but also to receive feedback at a meta-level to find out what an adaptation means for a local reality. From inclusive scaling to a systems approach, Domenico Dentoni further states that we should not only consider trade-offs in our food systems approach, but also systematically include and challenge constraints (e.g. cultural or institutional). Finally, Mary Teddy Asio reflected especially on the recent shift in thinking to regard formal and informal seed systems as combined opportunities for change, instead of seeing them as one or the other, since in Uganda, and many other African countries, about 85% of the seed supply comes through the informal system. She also stressed an opportunity which was not covered in the NL-CGIAR research programme as such: digitalisation of the seed system; making for example quality declaration of seed just one click away.

Final wrap up – a common vision again

It seems to be the phrase of the conference: **develop a common vision**. In the final wrap up of the day, **Isabelle Baltenweck** (CGIAR) talks about how she as a scientist in CGIAR now goes about transformative partnerships and co-designing work, constantly asking: how do we agree on a common vision, what is everyone's role, how do we move forward together, what do governments bring to the table? And one of the things **Wijnand van Ijssel** (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) emphasises in his wrap up is the constant going back and forth between the generic global challenges for food system transformation and the need for contextualisation. Both Wijnand van Ijssel and Isabelle Baltenweck give away clues on how to do this: 'the diversity of voices and exchanges is very important, because diversity and southern participation is still lacking in global science debate' (Wijnand van Ijssel) and 'as researchers we have to be bold and work across disciplines' (Isabelle Baltenweck).

Amanda Harding and Gerrie Tuitert closed the NL-CGIAR conference and shared their gratitude to everybody that made this event possible and a success.

***Amanda Harding** (Convene), conference moderator: From my birds-eye view, the range of NL-CGIAR projects and initiatives nourishing the combination of panels, debates, arm-chair chats, and carefully curated breakout sessions saw a collective call for a comprehensive food system vision supported by an ambitious strategy, the urgent scaling of transformative inclusive partnerships, the knotty need to address the tension of sustainable smallholder livelihoods where economic models are not in their favour, and the imperative to better translate research results to action and impact.*

Interested in more information about the NL-CGIAR research programme?

- About the programme: www.nwo.nl/cgiar
- NL-CGIAR magazine: <https://www.nwo.nl/en/nl-cgiar-magazine>
- NL-CGIAR synthesis study: <https://www.nwo.nl/en/researchprogrammes/netherlands-nl-cgiar-research-programme/synthesis-study-nl-cgiar-research-programme>
- NL-CGIAR animations: <https://www.nwo.nl/node/50640>
- For questions contact: NL-CGIAR@nwo.nl

Annex I – Programme of the NL-CGIAR conference

Wednesday 2 November

12.00 – 13.15 CET	Opening session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Welcome by Wilma van Esch (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Floor Boselie Abbenhuis (Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality) – Keynote speech by Juan Lucas Restrepo (CGIAR) – Panel conversation with Namukolo Covic (CGIAR), Elizabeth Swai (AKM Glitters Idt.) and Jan Willem Nibbering (Dutch Embassy Burundi). Reaction by Emma Naluyima (One Acre Fund)
Break	
13.30 – 15:00	Deep dive into the NL-CGIAR Synthesis Study findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Food Fight 3 on ‘Public Private Partnerships in agriculture for food security’ with Sarah Cummings (WUR) and Ken Giller (WUR) – Armchair discussion with Conny Almekinders (WUR) and Erwin Bulte (WUR) – Q&A with Sarah Cummings, Ken Giller, Conny Almekinders and Erwin Bulte – Wrap up by Marja Spierenburg (Leiden University)
Break	
15.15 – 16.15	Poster session
16.15 – 16.30	Closing of day 1

Thursday 3 November

12.00 – 12.30	Opening and thematic pitches
12.30 – 13.30	Dialogue for global food security round 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Food systems for zero hunger – Sustainable, inclusive and resilient agriculture – Inclusive and resilient value chains and agribusiness – Inclusive access to seed
Break	
13.45 – 14:00	Plenary overview of outcomes round 1
14:00 – 15:00	Dialogue for global food security round 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Food systems for zero hunger – Sustainable, inclusive and resilient agriculture – Inclusive and resilient value chains and agribusiness – Inclusive access to seed
Break	
15.15 – 15.30	Plenary overview of outcomes round 2
15.30 – 16.15	Wrapping up for global food security <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Panel conversation with Øystein Botillen (Yara), Mary Teddy Asio (Ministry of East African Community Affairs, Uganda) and Domenico Dentoni (WUR and Montpellier Business School) – Wrap-up by Wijnand van IJssel (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Isabelle Baltenweck (CGIAR)

Annex II – key messages per cross-cutting theme, as emerged from the thematic sessions on day 2 of the NL-CGIAR conference

Partnerships

- Partnerships need to go well beyond research communities and NGOs, with key roles for the private sector and governments. Partnerships should start open-minded and be related to the innovation and needs in the local context.
- In a research partnership, other agencies (private sector, public, finance agencies, etc.) create the conditions under which researchers can work. All partners need to be on board right from the beginning.
- Overcoming the challenges, for example dealing with or overcoming power structures (e.g. when dealing with local partners), requires knowledge and tactics. There are various ways to get around challenges with partnerships, e.g: [New integrated methodology supports inclusive and resilient global food systems transformation – CIMMYT](#).
- Programme design: think carefully about what has to be done at programme level, and what can be done at project level, and what can be done at country level. Maybe not every project has to connect with all stakeholders itself, but some things can be shared across projects or at a programme level.
- The length of contact with partners and communities needs to be considered more often. Many projects fail because of a lack of time to develop meaningful and strong relationships.

Equality

- Be intentional, measure progress and impact, make sure that those people/groups who are not typically heard are also represented and think about how to build equity and justice into our analyses.
- Whereas needs for marginalised groups need to be considered from context to context, in the case of women, the gender responsible scaling tool might help to systematically tackle some issues.
- Rather than focussing so much on women, also ask the question how we can we work with households in a way that gender balance is enhanced, but without taking the household as a ‘unit’.
- Deal with the complexity and trade-offs of fast scaling or being inclusive to the broad diversity of smallholders (also the smallest of the smallest) by providing broader baskets of technologies, and providing a wide range of options for a wide range of beneficiaries.
- Think about who will address the smallest of the smallholders and how. And think about how to convince funding agencies about working with the poorest of the poor. This might not be in their interest.
- Think carefully about the notion of demand and the methods we use to determine demands. First, different types of farmers have different types of demands, and there are also the demands of others who are part of the system, e.g. processors or consumers. Second, there are different methods to assess demands, and the choice of method influences the outcome. Methods to assess demand are thus context-dependent. Third, demands are met by different systems.
- Think of unexpected solutions (e.g. ‘hurting farmers to help them’).

Systems approach

- The NL-CGIAR projects and assignments recognised and supported the agency of the very diverse smallholder farmers and worked on ways to remove structural constraints. For example, by ensuring access to finance, changing gender norms, creating and supporting new businesses and setting up different consortia which can create space for farmers to exercise their agency.
- Systemic constraints like infrastructure and education need to be addressed simultaneously. If they are not looked at together, agricultural outcomes will also not be on a desirable level.
- Systems analyses approaches help us understand trade-offs and interconnectedness, for example in scaling questions and issues with the broader societal goals and the environment versus the individual goals.
- Embrace broad, encompassing ways of looking at outcomes. Do not only consider the food security or production related outcomes for farmers, but also consider issues that have to do with the environment and biophysical aspects of the systems, broader benefits to society or a healthy living environment or food safety.
- Strive for agreement on indicators for working together and moving ahead, suitable for a broad systems approach and to be shared across projects, with common metrics across different projects. Transforming

food systems is a long term programme, hence there is an urgent need for good indicators (quality diets, environmental impact of food security) to understand ongoing changes and their impact. Indicators should be combined and instrumental in the transformation of food systems. The Sustainable Development Goals indicators are a start.

- Think about how people can be rewarded when they benefit the environment or broader societal goals.
- Be aware of silos and find ways to overcome them. Researchers are driven in silos by specialisation, disciplines and methodological preferences, but also by donors, who have specific preferences and development pathways. In the case of seed systems development these preferences are towards commercial pathways and formal seed systems, whereas farmers fit in a multiplicity of systems.
- Recognize the importance of building greater complementarity and coordination in seed systems. This can be done by capacity building and by creating incentives, e.g. based on feedback mechanisms such as was done in the SSD Uganda project.

Enabling & scaling

- Try to zoom out and learn from examples that already exist elsewhere, e.g. for healthy diets or climate change adaptation we can learn from what is being done elsewhere (e.g. specific cultivars). At the same time, never forget the local context, because that determines feasibility and local priorities.
- Scale step-by-step, horizontal and vertical.
- Think carefully about what we are scaling and who is benefitting from the results. Are we scaling a technology in order to reach more farmers? Or are we scaling the approach, in order to work with different commodities or contexts?
- Scaling needs to be budgeted for in project planning.
- Employ a systems approach to determine potential outcomes of scaling and avoid unintended negative consequences, e.g. for the environment.
- There is need for some regulation and control in scaling systems (role of public sector). In some cases spontaneous scaling has not been good to the environment.
- Think about who is responsible for scaling. Are (CGIAR) researchers responsible for scaling or do they create pilots? Include actors in the partnership who are able to scale right from the beginning. Also take into account contextualisation here.
- Scaling is also inherent: researchers pay attention to understanding the enabling environment and context and what we can potentially do. They identify weaknesses or opportunities to allow more space for spontaneous scaling.
- Research can make use of the opportunity-momentum for scaling, which are often political.
- Continuity is important for enabling and scaling. Why not fund successful projects for another term in which they can focus on scaling?
- Include governments from the start in programmes, gain their interest and perhaps have them co-finance programmes.