

Boosting agrifood research and innovation cooperation for impact at scale

Conference report.
11-13 March 2025, Brussels.



DeSIRA
PARTNERSHIPS
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Colophon

The [DeSIRA Initiative](#)¹ (Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture), funded by the European Commission, Directorate General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), seeks to enhance an inclusive, sustainable and climate-relevant transformation of rural areas and of agri-food systems, by linking better agricultural innovation with research for more developmental impact. It supports actions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to strengthen the resilience of their agri-food systems, the relevance of the national and regional research and innovation systems, and the coherence and efficiency of their agricultural public research and extension services related to climate change challenges.

[DeSIRA-LIFT](#)² (Leveraging the DeSIRA Initiative for Agri-Food Systems Transformation) is a service project (June 2021 – May 2024) to the European Commission, DG INTPA with the main objective to enhance the impact of the DeSIRA Initiative by providing (ondemand) services to DeSIRA project holders and partners. DeSIRA-LIFT includes three service areas aligned to the three DeSIRA Pillars:

Service Area 1 supports country-led DeSIRA projects to enhance their impacts on climate-oriented innovation systems in line with more sustainable food system transitions. **Service Area 2** supports the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) ex-pillar IV organizations in their Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) related roles. **Service Area 3** is providing support to policy makers on themes related to agricultural research for development (AR4D) and innovation policies and programming.

DeSIRA-LIFT is implemented by members of the Agrinatura and EFARD, in particular the members: Wageningen UR, CIRAD ISA (University of Lisbon), NRI (University of Greenwich), SLU and COLEAD. Agrinatura (<http://agrinatura-eu.eu>) is the European Alliance on agricultural knowledge for development. EFARD (<http://www.efard.org>) is an umbrella network of European research and non-research stakeholders from public and private European organisations and the European Commission.

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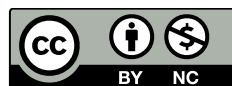
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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

AU	African Union
CAADP	Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme
CGIAR	formerly the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research
DeSIRA	Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture
DG	Directorate General
DG AGRI	DG Agriculture
DG INTPA	DG International Partnerships
DG RTD	DG Research, Technology and Development
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FARA	Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa
FNSSA	Food & Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture
GFAiR	Global Forum on Agricultural Research and Innovation
GNC	Global NARS Consortium
IRC	International Research Consortium
JRC	Joint Research Centre
NARS	National Agricultural Research Systems
R&I	Research & Innovation
RUFORUM	Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture
SCAR-ARCH	Standing Committee on Agricultural Research - European Agricultural Research towards greater impact on global challenges

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Summary

To achieve sustainable impact at scale, agrifood research and innovation (R&I) cooperation can be boosted through the following mechanisms:

- Co-ownership of design and implementation of R&I projects by multiple stakeholders (researchers, farmers, enterprises, and policy makers) with multi-actor approaches and through place-based innovation tools such as living labs.
- Institutional ownership to align economic, environmental, and social outcomes of R&I projects with local, national, and regional priorities.
- Viable and inclusive financial strategies to support experimentation, risk-taking, scaling of innovation and long-term commitments.
- Strengthening the capacities of the people and institutions that drive innovation processes.
- Investments in systems thinking, knowledge integration and long-term support to connect science, policy, and practice. Such investments will realize the potential of transformative approaches such as agroecology that address production, climate, biodiversity, and equity challenges in agrifood systems.

These main lessons were shared and validated during the conference ‘Boosting agrifood research and innovation cooperation for impact at scale’ which took place in Brussels (11-13 March 2025). They were built on the collective achievements and consolidated lessons of the R&I programmes implemented or supported by the European Union (EU). To effectively contribute to desirable agrifood systems transformation in this time of poly-crisis, investments in R&I are more than ever required and need to be done in partnership. This premise of the conference was widely endorsed by participants and speakers as Patrick Caron, Vice Chair of the CGIAR board, alluded to in his closing remarks: *‘We need research in partnership when we move in the unknown; not just to value synergies and prevent duplication, but also to enlighten our common destiny.’* The R&I orientation for food systems transformation was discussed with a focus on innovative approaches such as agroecology, nature-based solutions, and nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

The conference was organised with the explicit intention to inform future programming and investments in agrifood systems R&I. This report summarizes the main conclusions and recommendations of the conference that will feed into the new EU-AU FNSSA Roadmap (Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture) and other relevant European, African, and global policies. Reflections and recommendations for current and future R&I cooperation include:

- Strengthen the international dialogue on R&I cooperation;

The Global R&I Cooperation conference, entitled ‘Boosting agrifood research and innovation cooperation for impact at scale’ discussed lessons from the DeSIRA initiative coming to an end (80 projects, €340 million + €60 million from EU Member states). It was organized by the European Commission (EC)’s Directorate-General International Partnerships (DG INTPA) in collaboration with DG Research & Innovation (RTD) and DG for Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI) to include in the discussions the full range of EU support to R&I at international level (H2020, Horizon Europe). The third day was fully organised by key partners – FARA, GFAiR, JRC, SCAR-ARCH, and others - to share and discuss about current and future interventions.

The global R&I conference brought together researchers, policymakers, farmers, civil society organisations and other experts to explore how research and innovation (R&I) can transform agrifood systems to be more productive, inclusive, climate-resilient, sustainable, and biodiversity-positive. The event was attended by more than 160 professionals

- Provide coherent support to future R&I programming and interventions;
- Strengthen the coordination and governance of AU-EU R&I initiatives;
- Build innovative funding mechanisms to support innovation at scale.

1. Main outcomes of the conference

1.1 Strengthening multi-stakeholder mechanisms and co-innovation

A convergence of views emerged throughout the conference: for agrifood R&I to contribute to systemic impact at scale, design and implementation needs to be co-owned by different stakeholders. Researchers, farmers, private actors, and policymakers must be involved from the very beginning—not just as contributors, but as co-designers, co-innovators and, preferably, co-investors (in cash or in kind). DeSIRA projects showed how embedding these diverse voices leads to more relevant, impactful, and scalable innovations. At the same time, flexibility is necessary to be able to adapt to changing contexts. This is especially the case in fragile regions and countries with high level of uncertainties. Several recommendations on multi-stakeholder partnerships emerged from the conference presentations and discussions.

- Successful R&I programmes and projects require developing and refining multi-stakeholder approaches, involving farmers, researchers, policymakers, and the private sector from inception phase.
- Institutionalising multi-stakeholder engagement in funding programmes and research governance frameworks help creating a stronger enabling environment for sustained collaboration. By embedding long-term partnership mechanisms into the foundations of R&I systems, innovations can be more impactful in the long run. This long view is essential to move beyond fragmented projects and towards continuous, adaptive, and trust-based cooperation.
- The DeSIRA initiative exemplifies how participation for co-designing and scaling innovation leads to relevant outcomes and impacts—a viewpoint echoed by numerous conference participants. Furthermore, experiences shared and discussed during the different parallel sessions highlight the essential role of multi-stakeholder approaches at various levels (at farm or value chain level, landscape, or national agricultural innovation system level). These approaches are necessary for ensuring continuity, ownership, and ultimately, systems-level change.

1.2 Evidence-informed policies for an enabling innovation ecosystem

Many discussions underscored the importance of recognizing and aligning with local and national priorities and needs for R&I projects to ensure systemic and sustainable impact on different economic, environmental, and social outcomes. Building institutional ownership from the outset is crucial and can be achieved through strategic engagement with policymakers. 'Champions' within the political system can be used to convey messages. The following recommendations on evidence-informed policies emerged from the conference presentations and discussions:

- For R&I to leverage processes with impact on decision-making, political economy aspects need to be addressed from the beginning. Research can provide evidence and technical expertise, as well as play the role of facilitator and policy broker in agricultural strategies, investment planning, innovation policies and other relevant policy processes. To effectively support policymakers, it requires specific skills and early, politically smart engagement going beyond publishing ad hoc policy briefs.
- Experiences shared by online participants highlighted how sectoral silos can hinder scaling efforts. Aligning agricultural research with broader policy areas (e.g., climate, environment,

economic development, health) helps inform policy priorities and investments to ensure that R&I efforts towards more productive, inclusive, and sustainable agrifood systems are more effectively implemented and achieve sustained impact.

- Experiences of several DeSIRA partners demonstrated that long-term policy engagement—through dialogue platforms, co-design processes, and joint learning—can shape the necessary enabling ecosystem for innovation. Mobilizing innovation support services (incubator, advisory service, innovation facilitator, etc.) at various stages of the innovation journey is essential to prevent R&I projects from stalling at the pilot phase and to assist actors in scaling innovation.

1.3 Mobilising innovative financing mechanisms and business models

Innovation needs more than promising ideas—it requires viable, inclusive financial strategies that can support experimentation, risk-taking, scaling, and long-term commitment. At the conference, participants discussed blended finance models, co-funding arrangements, and portfolio-based approaches as essential tools to unlock resources and de-risk investment in agrifood systems. The following recommendations on financing mechanisms emerged from the conference presentations and discussions:

- Innovative financing instruments, such as blended finance, risk-sharing mechanisms, or crowdfunding are needed to stimulate public and private investment in innovations and encourage uptake of novel solutions.
- Business models and investment cases should be built into the initial stages of R&I projects to ensure sustainability beyond donor funding cycles. The existing European funding instruments should be better articulated along the funding journey to support all the innovation phases from experimentation to scaling.
- DeSIRA's experiences illustrated the importance of distinguishing public good research—where impact is distributed widely—from private innovation, which requires different incentives and expectations regarding returns on investments. This distinction helped shape more specific roles for funders, investors, and implementing partners.

1.4 Building capacities that match structural realities

Innovation processes are only as strong as the people and institutions that drive them. Across sessions, participants stressed the need to go beyond technical capacity and address functional capacities (including facilitation, negotiation, and leadership). Strengthening the agency and voice of local actors, especially those often excluded from innovation systems, was a recurring theme. The following recommendations on capacity strengthening emerged from the conference presentations and discussions:

- Strengthening grassroots innovation networks, farmer organisations, and rural extension services helps anchor innovation in communities and ensure knowledge flows both ways. The role of place-based innovation tools, such as living labs and lighthouses, is key to ensure impact and upscaling of innovation.
- Capacity-building efforts should be tailored to different contexts, addressing structural inequities like gender disparities, unequal power dynamics, and limited access to resources. During the parallel session on capacity building, conference participants recommended integrating soft skills, such as negotiation and advocacy, alongside technical training.

- The DeSIRA initiative underscored the value of building functional capacities especially at meso- and macro-levels of agricultural innovation systems. The capacities of innovation ecosystem including organisations to innovate or to provide support to innovators needs to be strengthened.

1.5 Supporting agroecological and food system transitions

Agroecology was highlighted as a transformative approach capable of addressing production, climate, biodiversity, and equity challenges in agrifood systems. However, participants noted that realizing its potential requires investment in systems thinking, knowledge integration, and long-term support. Connecting science, policy, and practice remains a central challenge in this field. The following recommendations on agroecological transitions emerged from the conference presentations and discussions:

- Agroecological approaches need to be integrated into R&I agendas as legitimate and evidence-based pathways for sustainable agrifood system transformation. There is a need of R&I investment based on cutting-edge science to develop the full potential of agroecology.
- R&I interventions should better address market issues along agroecological value chains embedded in local territories and with a specific focus on processing, circular economy, and bioeconomy.
- Strengthening data systems and monitoring frameworks built on local realities is necessary to respond to a policy-driven questions that emerge. Investing in indicators that not only measure economic outcomes, but also environmental and social outcomes is essential for tracking what matters in agrifood systems and agroecological transitions.
- The DeSIRA experience demonstrated that agroecological innovation thrives when local actors are empowered, when policies support innovative approaches and when research is embedded in long-term, participatory processes that align with national and global sustainability goals.

1.6 Improving international R&I cooperation

Participants actively reflected on the wealth of lessons generated by the DeSIRA initiative, other similar interventions (e.g. Horizon Europe programme, CGIAR interventions) and collaborations with African partners like FARA (Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa) or RUFORUM (Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture). These insights were useful to build a shared diagnosis to ground discussions based on evidence on what works—and what must change—in supporting innovation for systemic transformation. This collective learning was widely valued and seen as essential for improving future programming and policymaking.

However, in a context of changing political and funding landscapes, building on lessons and aligning with broader European and African frameworks such as the EU Global Gateway and the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) is crucial to ensure investments in R&I for agrifood systems transformation achieve impact. During the conference, the follow insights were discussed regarding R&I cooperation between Africa and Europe:

- **Europe and Africa need to work towards a common vision and agreed programming to address mutual challenges.** Both the FNSSA Roadmap – part of the collaborative effort between Africa and Europe to undertake joint action in R&I for food and nutrition security and

sustainable agriculture – and the new International Research Consortium (IRC) serve as platforms to set out priority research and innovation agendas. Co-funded instruments like the past LEAP-Agri (ERA-Net instrument) or the on-going European Partnership on the area of agriculture and food systems offer tangible frameworks to coordinate joint investments and implementation of R&I programs with the goal of driving food systems change.

- **There is scope to enhance the coherence and complementarity between European instruments.** Strengthening the identification and implementation of priorities between DG RTD, DG AGRI and DG INTPA has the potential to support innovation at different phases. DG RTD and DG AGRI have a focus on promoting collaboration in science for innovation through Horizon Europe. The international dimension of some of the Horizon Europe Partnerships, like the Food Systems partnership or the Agroecology partnership, and some of the EU Missions like the Soil Mission, could be strengthened. DG INTPA, in line with the Global Gateway strategy, supports innovation at scale in selected value chains with the support of research. The education and research pillar of the Global Gateway garnered significant attention and should be further enriched through dialogue with African partners.
- **The changing funding landscape for international cooperation calls for the mobilisation of innovative financing mechanisms like blending, carbon markets, biodiversity certificates and smarter leveraging of private sector funding for mission-driven R&I.** The conference participants also noted the increased need for co-investments from the African side. However, the difference in resources between the two continents poses constraints, complicating the levels of equality and ownership of the European-African R&I agenda.

2. Recommendations and next steps

'Agricultural R&I is a structural element of global, regional, and national infrastructure that underpins global food security, climate action and economic development. Given its spillover effects, R&I for agricultural development should be lifted as one of the key pillars of the EU's foreign policy' recommended Lindiwe Sibanda, Chair of CGIAR's Integrated Partnership Board in her keynote.

Based on the lessons on R&I cooperation to reach impact at scale, the conference provided relevant recommendations useful for the European Commission and partners.

2.1 Strengthen the international dialogue on R&I cooperation

Strengthening the existing dialogue between African, European, and global actors emerged as a strategic priority to enhance mutual learning and foster joint innovation.

- Stronger fora at global, (inter)continental and regional levels with multiple actors will help identify priorities, coordinate investments, facilitate sharing of results and knowledge, and amplify the reach and impact of advocacy and dialogue with policy makers.
- Stronger fora will also provide policy support for updating and supporting the AU-EU FNSSA Roadmap and developing the innovation agenda to build future R&I interventions that can contribute to the implementation of CAADP and the Global Gateway Strategy.
- The AU-EU dialogue needs to reflect the new context of poly-crises, changing political priorities and declining budgets. The AU-EU Agriculture Ministerial and the AU-EU Summits are key moments to show leadership, defining key objectives and strengthening alliances.

2.2 Provide innovative coherent support to future R&I interventions

Providing innovative and efficient support and services to design, implement and monitor R&I interventions to scale innovation.

- Research has a critical role to play in building the knowledge, evidence, and tools needed to scale responsible and inclusive innovation and providing support to various actors (farmers' organisations, firms, NGO) through multi-stakeholder approaches.
- Developing capacities (platforms, innovation hubs, etc.) at country and regional level is key to help actors design relevant and efficient R&I interventions that foster open innovation processes. It requires to invest in capacity strengthening for professionals and youth (e.g. innovation facilitators, new curricula on innovation).
- The EU, with partners, needs to contribute to enrich the pillar "education and research" of the EU Global Gateway strategy. The goal is to support private investments along value chains using a comprehensive 360-degree approach, fostering win-win solutions between the AU and the EU.
- DeSIRA+ and the Regional Multi-Actor Research Network (RMRN) mark a shift toward agrifood sector-led innovation, supported by research, with a clear ambition to foster agroecological transitions across Sub-Saharan Africa. The support to these initiative needs to be better linked to AU-EU mechanisms for monitoring the innovation agenda.
- Horizon Europe has the potential to foster transdisciplinary collaborations that tackle complex agrifood system challenges. Building on the experience of DeSIRA, future Horizon projects could benefit from integrating innovation support services at project level and also at portfolio

or regional level, including support in design, monitoring (to prove and improve impact), and exit strategies.

2.3 Improve the coordination and governance of AU/EU R&I initiatives

The conference underscored the importance of embedding investments in R&I more systematically in national and continental policy processes.

- Aligning research with long-term policy frameworks such as the national agricultural investment plans under CAADP can increase the visibility and uptake of innovations, especially when done through inclusive, regionally anchored platforms.
- For the EC, strengthening the articulation of INTPA/RTD/AGRI R&I instruments is needed to support innovation in agrifood systems in partner countries more effectively. Bridging the complementary mandates of these DGs can significantly enhance the impact and coherence of EU-supported agrifood R&I initiatives.
- The IRC is a designated platform to align AU-EU R&I efforts on FNSSA, with the ambition to reduce fragmentation and create enabling environments for scaling innovations through joint priority-setting, coordinated funding, and policy alignment. It must be used to implement CAADP priorities and the Global Gateway Strategy.
- The Global NARS Consortium (GNC) supported by GFAiR, a new initiative to strengthen the collective voice and global representation of National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), should play an effective role to bridge the gap between international research and national systems, ensuring that international R&I interventions effectively respond to local agrifood system challenges.

2.4 Building innovative funding mechanisms for innovation at scale

Access to finance was a key topic of discussion at the conference with participants advocating for innovative funding mechanisms to support systemic innovation efforts.

- Many participants called for the development of joint funding mechanisms that embed co-ownership and align priorities across both continents. Coordinated mobilisation of co-investments from AU and its Member States, EU and its Member State (Team Europe) for new joint R&I interventions is recommended.
- Design proposals and mechanisms for the mobilisation of private funding and innovative funding (from start-up to scale up) especially for AU-EU funded projects willing to scale outcomes. It calls for better coordinating funding mechanisms to support the long innovation journey: seed funds to investigate and take risks; support to start-ups with grants, blending, or equity; support to collective innovation with carbon markets or biodiversity certificates.
- Working together to identify opportunities for international cooperation of Horizon Europe tools such as the partnerships, the missions, or the European Innovation Council.

Annex: Recommendations for Research and Innovation Cooperation

The recommendations presented below were the result of the input from the conference participants during the various working sessions. Together with the recommendations from the DeSIRA initiative, which were shared with the participants beforehand, they offer a validated and balanced set of recommendations. They were ranked live at the conference by the participants to select the key recommendations to be put towards the high-level panel for further discussion.

Recommendations on doing research

Encourage user-centric R&I processes, including farmer-led R&I, and frugal interventions with long-term support
Provide an enabling environment for partnerships, linking research to innovation processes led by private and non-private actors
Design participatory action research and open innovation processes from the start
Enhance structures and mechanisms to accommodate iterative learning and long-term support to R&I interventions
Include a Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning system, based on a clear Theory of Change, to support reflection and adaptive management
Develop specific interventions for fragile situations by addressing specific needs and mobilising local partnerships

Recommendations on multi-actor approach

Design institutions and funding mechanisms that support long-term and equal R&I partnerships for success
Ensure alignment between research investments, other investments, and national innovation priorities
Foster exchanges of experiences on methods and results of multi-actor approaches, place-based innovation such as living labs, and other mechanisms to support innovation within and between regions
Encourage co-innovation processes with multi-actor approaches, with specific attention for champions
Develop training programmes and business opportunities for innovation facilitators who support innovation processes towards impact

Recommendations on policy for innovation

Embed policy dialogue approaches from the outset and actively engage policymakers in innovation processes
Strengthen platforms and networks that already exist and bring all actors to the table
Foster inclusive policy dialogues mobilising evidence-based lessons and models for common vision
Support design and implementation of innovative funding and de-risking mechanisms mobilising public and private actors

Strengthen dialogue between AU and EU (and within each organisation and their members) to define priorities

Support the design of innovation-friendly regulatory frameworks

Recommendations on Agricultural Innovation Systems

Invest in capacity building of actors and organisations for multi-stakeholder partnerships and co-innovation including advisory services

Strengthen public-private partnerships able to mobilise blended finance to support responsible innovation

Regarding the EU contribution, maintain long-term support to successful R&I in partner countries including priority value chains

Provide evidence and metrics based on R&I interventions on the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of innovation

Continue and strengthen the partnership with regional, continental, and global actors

Ensure a better articulation between the different EU mechanisms and funding

Map Agricultural Innovation System actors and establish effective partnerships by strengthening capacities

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