

Closing thoughts and take-away messages

“Boosting agrifood research and innovation cooperation for impact at scale” DESIRA Conference

Patrick Caron, Brussels, 13 March

Exchanges were dense and rich and let me share part of what I have heard and my sense about our direction. To make it short, I would say that many changes are taking place here and there while the desired impact at scale is not at the rendez-vous, and we need to shape learning spaces and to better connect local innovation with impact at a significant scale. We need to design and implement a rainbow revolution ; let me explain.

We are here because we are convinced by the need for profound changes in food systems, towards sustainability. I have heard and observed three pillars to move the title of the conference forward, i.e. “Boosting agrifood research and innovation cooperation for sustainable impact at scale”. Firstly, we have a common vision, i.e. strengthening food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture through agroecological transition. As stated by Lindiwe Sibanda during the introduction, we need “to make agrifood systems more inclusive, equitable, climate-resilient, and sustainable, while protecting biodiversity and ensuring food and nutrition for all”. Secondly, we are looking at avenues to do so through the contribution of research and innovation to development. Development through research, as we said at Cirad, considering research as a driver for change. Finally, we consider partnership as a must, as illustrated by the presentation of the International Research Consortium and the Global NARS Consortium today.

However, I observed a huge paradox. On the one hand, we all agree about the need for a deep transformation because of on-going trends, with food systems being a powerful lever for all dimensions of sustainability. Despite the fact that we know and despite calls for action, there is a perception of inaction. On the other hand, many initiatives and transformation are taking place here and there, with incredible engagement and energy like illustrated by the movie about the Desira Project in Guinea Bissau yesterday. Mamadou Cissokho has said « on est en train de le faire, mais ce n’est pas suffisant » (« We are doing it, but it is not enough »).

Why such a gap? Is it because we end up talking and not doing, i.e. the famous « bla bla bla »? Or rather, and this is my assumption, because we are blind or at least dystopic. This gap is intriguing and invites us to focus on scalability as said by Leonard Mizzi. We have to acknowledge and insist on what matters to boost innovation as we have done during three days: context specificity, proximity, inclusivity, empowerment, co-design, that all advocate for boosting local innovation. We also have to consider and address the legitimate expectations from development stakeholders and agencies, from donors, from policy-makers to achieve impact at a significant scale. I noticed that we used many different expressions : scaling, scaling up or out, scalability, impact at scale, scaling down,

The easy temptation to bridge this gap would be to look for success stories in order to reproduce or duplicate them. But we know replication is a myth for many reasons : there is no silver bullet ; solutions need to be adapted to the context ; the concentration of resources to engage in pilot experimentations is not reproducible, etc. We are all aware about this and we all engaged in avenues to explore and address

this paradox. We have done so during these three days by exploring three main avenues: enabling policies, funding mechanisms including through blending public and private finances, capacity strengthening. What we discussed here is our need to further frame and boost our capacity to address this « scalability » gap, and what should be the role and function of research for doing so.

I would challenge this expression, « scaling up », for two sets of reasons. To begin with, success stories are not replicable, even if we can and should learn from them. Secondly, the transformation that we need requires innovation at all scales : at the local one, as rightly emphasized during these three days ; at the national scale through agricultural, health, environment, labour policies, through laws and regulations, etc. ; at the global scale through norms and standards for action. For example, revisiting trade rules has been a taboo for long ; it has now become a must since 20 January 2025 and is « the big elephant in the room ». Similarly, the expression « enabling environment » is not appropriate. What we are talking about is not external to the innovation; it is part of it. We need to innovate at all levels as the multiplication of local success stories will not deliver what we are looking for. The huge challenge we face is to articulate innovation at local, national and global levels. The role of meso structures like the territory is key to do so. As a consequence, I would suggest to embark in a rainbow revolution, with reference to my south african friends and colleagues and to the rainbow nation; we need to account for diversity of local contexts, while acknowledging our common destiny and supporting the design and implementation of one common project.

To engage in such an avenue, the role of research is key. Not just to design and experiment technology, which is important, but also to document successes and failures and learn from them - this is why Desira Lift is a beauty, to make action knowledgeable and knowledge actionable through the design and production of relevant and meaningful evidence and metrics, to identify obstacles to changes and explore avenues to overcome them, to address controversies, better understand disagreements and move them into agreements, and to engage in foresight and anticipation and think the unthinkable as we are moving to the unknown.

As a researcher, you may say I am biased but I hope I convinced you that the role of research is key. Not to prescribe but to pool collective intelligence, to help shaping the agenda for action and engage in scientific diplomacy, to highlight choices, and to identify avenues to address obstacles.

Such a challenge requires revisiting the way we partner. Innovation and partnership cannot be looked at in isolation when implementing complex food systems transformation. This was highlighted by the CGIAR Board chair, Lindiwe Sibanda, and all along the conference, in particular by GFAiR. There are very promising examples of innovative ways to move forward; let me mention the Cirad platforms in partnership where co-design of programmes across multiple partners is key. At CGIAR, we are committed to review and adapt the partnership modalities through a revised strategy. As highlighted by our High Level Advisory Panel, we are no longer in the 20th century, and the urgency calls for building on complementarity and international partnership rather than substituting the difficulty to deliver outcome.

As a consequence of what I said, we need to invest into four directions to boost the role of science and innovation to impact at scale. We firstly have to organize risky safe spaces, where we can address controversies and obstacles; we have to be courageous enough to address pain points and trade offs. Secondly, we have to shape learning spaces as offered by DESIRA Lift to learn from many on-going processes. My third recommendation is to support « contamination » from one scale to another; as changes will never take place at all levels simultaneously, we need to learn from local processes to act at the global scale and vice versa. Finally, it is time to design new global intellectual and operational

frameworks to act and the perfect storm offers an incredible opportunity to do so. I mentioned trade, and we should also look at repurposing subsidies to ensure the convergence across public and private investments towards the delivery of public goods.

To move towards such a direction and to support the European Global Gateway Strategy and the African new CAADP framework, we need research, all types of research : not just research for production of knowledge, but also for production of intelligence and action. How could we move to the unknown without intelligence? What could be better than looking at research in partnership, not just to value synergies and prevent duplication, but also to enlighten our common destiny?

For these reasons, with support from the European Commission, CGIAR and Cirad have supported a process that was named the Montpellier process since the first step was organized there, as a way to look at innovative Science-Policy-Society-Interfaces. The objective is to strengthen dialogue capacity across stakeholders, across sectors and the nexus Feed/Protect/Care, across scales – from local to global and back.

As a global partnership, CGIAR and its centres are also ready to engage with European and African partners to address such challenges, as stated by my chair in her opening remarks. This calls for a Team Europe dynamics bringing together institutions, resources and capacities. This also calls for a Africa – Europe Team, building on a ten years journey and on what we discussed during these three days, including the need to explore new financing horizons and mechanisms.

At the moment when available resources may become limited and because we are all concerned with their allocation according to priorities, let me finish by stating that DESIRA is a fantastic initiative. It brings research, innovation and impact together. It brings European and African partners together. It brings stakeholders from agriculture and food, international cooperation and research together, including European Commission Directions, to pool collective intelligence and articulate their interventions in order to bridge knowledge production and impact at scale. It makes it possible to seriously address concerns and questions about « scalability », moving away from classical set up and arrangements. DESIRA is innovating. Last but not least, it offers a long term learning and capacity sharing space.

Let's not give up such an asset at the moment when crisis offers opportunities for change. Let's value and promote it. Let's build an intelligent innovation ecosystem and prepare ourselves to important milestones on the global agenda as suggested by Leonard Mizzi: the Nutrition for Growth Summit, the EU-AU dialogue, the food days of environment Conventions and COPs, G7 and G20 meetings, the stock taking moment of the UN Food System Summit, and the perspective of negotiation about trade and taxes and subsidies to be repurposed.