

8th GFRAS Annual Meeting 2017

Summary Report

Draft, March 2018

1. Background and objectives of the 8th GFRAS Annual Meeting

The Annual Meetings of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) foster exchange on approaches to and experiences in agricultural extension and rural advisory services (RAS) between diverse stakeholders and across regions. They also aim at discussing the strategic directions and functioning of GFRAS and its regional and national fora. The GFRAS Annual Meeting provides a space for learning and contributes to providing a voice for RAS at the international level.

The 8th Annual Meeting of GFRAS took place from **9 –13 September 2017** in **Ingham and Townsville, Australia**, with side events on 8 and 9 September. The thematic focus was “Rural Advisory Services and empowered youth for balanced transformation in rural and urban communities”. It was co-organised with the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (APEN) which held their 2017 International Conference overlapping with the GFRAS Annual Meeting from 12–15 September on the topic of “Facilitating balanced change for rural and urban communities”.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- identify and discuss roles, challenges and opportunities for youth to be meaningful actors in balanced and inclusive rural and urban transformation;
- identify and discuss the roles and relations between RAS and youth for inclusive and sustainable rural–urban linkages;
- identify and discuss changes in policies and the capacities of RAS needed for both RAS and youth to fulfil their roles;
- strengthen capacities of RAS networks through peer exchange and learning.

Selected results of this Annual Meeting include: the creation of a GFRAS Working Group on youth and RAS; the validation of the first GFRAS Issues Paper on ‘Youth and RAS’; and goals and action plans for regional networks to strengthen their capacities.

An Executive Summary, a PREZI report, the full presentations, agenda, concept note, participants list, graphic recording, video recordings and pictures can be found at: <http://www.g-fras.org/en/annual-meeting-2017.html>.

2. Structure of the meeting, participants and presentations

After the [side events](#) by APIRAS, PIRAS and the GFRAS Consortium on Extension Education and Training on 9 and 10 September 2017, the GFRAS Annual Meeting was opened with a Share Fair and ‘Meet and Greet’ session. The main sessions of the Annual Meeting were structured as follows:

- Sunday, 10 September, Ingham: Presentations and discussions around the theme of ‘Rural Advisory Services and empowered youth for balanced transformation in rural and urban communities’;
- Monday, 11 September, Ingham: Strengthening the advocacy capacities of regional networks;
- Tuesday, 12 September (overlapping with the APEN International Conference): [Field Trips](#), with a focus on the sugarcane industry and issues around land and water;
- Wednesday, 13 September, Townsville: Policy Roundtable on the core theme of the meeting followed by the formal opening of the APEN International Conference and formal closure of the GFRAS Annual Meeting; and

- Thursday – Friday 14-15 September, Townsville: the APEN International Conference which was held in parallel to the GFRAS Steering Committee Meeting.

Throughout the meeting, a variety of approaches towards exchange and learning were used, including plenary sessions, group work, panel discussions, shift and share sessions, parallel workshops and poster exhibitions.

The Annual Meeting sessions in Ingham benefitted from the expert inputs and contributions of over 80 participants from 15 regional RAS networks and 32 countries. The key characteristics of participants were as follows: 20% were under 40 years of age; 37% were women; 32% were drawn from civil society, 15% from the private sector, and 53% were from the public sector. Some 300 participants took part in the field trips and the policy dialogue, when the APEN participants joined the GFRAS meeting. The 8th GFRAS Annual Meeting was particularly commended by participants and development partners for ensuring that the voice of youth and farmers was heard.

[Keynote speeches](#) were made by the international experts Elke van der Fliert from the University of Queensland, and Regina Birner from the University of Hohenheim. During the panels and parallel workshops, farmers, youth, donor representatives, policy makers, academics, regional network representatives, and of course extension professionals from all sectors, gender and age groups all had the opportunity to feed in their perspectives. All inputs are listed in full in the [Meeting Guide](#).

3. Key issues addressed

3.1 Key challenges related to youth¹ in rural-urban transformations

Rural-urban migration dynamics and their consequences. The global youth population is estimated by FAO (2014)² to be 1.3 billion in 2050, of which the majority will be in developing countries in Africa and Asia. An estimated 55% will live in rural areas. However, rural youth in many developing countries are facing significant economic, political, demographic, social/cultural and environmental challenges in accessing quality employment and career opportunities, education, land and other resources, infrastructure, information, finance and other services in their communities. As a consequence, there is a significant global trend of rural youth actively seeking employment and livelihood opportunities in urban areas. This increased rural-urban migration of youth poses a number of challenges for rural and urban areas. In rural areas: populations are ageing; more households are headed by women (as it is more common for men to migrate); there are labour shortages; communities suffer from the out-migration of more educated young people ('brain drain'); levels of entrepreneurship are affected; and the rural economy overall, particularly agriculture, suffers. In urban areas, receiving more young people from rural areas has often been accompanied by a strain on public goods, services and infrastructure, can result in increased competition for jobs and leads to heightened potential for political unrest by where young people do not have jobs and where connectivity is limited.

Youth will feed the world in the future yet are not sufficiently included in discussions and decision-making on agriculture. Rural areas, and particularly agriculture, play a crucial role in enabling the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and particularly SDG 2 to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. There is therefore an urgent need to invest in the role and place of youth in agriculture and in rural areas in particular, as underlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Motivating youth to remain in agriculture or attracting youth to invest and work in agriculture are, however, global challenges. Furthermore, youth are often not visible in debates and decisions regarding agriculture, and are too often treated as stakeholders whose perspectives, visions, skills and experiences are less important than those of older generations.

Agriculture is not perceived as attractive enough by youth. Globally, agriculture is often perceived by youth as not competitive with other sectors in terms of providing opportunities for earning good incomes or generating opportunities for career development. Agriculture tends to have a bad image and is not often

¹ Participants chose to take a pragmatic approach to defining youth: not by age, but by the phase between childhood and the professional and private settlement in life.

² FAO. 2014. Youth and agriculture: Key challenges and concrete solutions. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. www.fao.org/3/a-i3947e.pdf

considered as a desirable sector to work in by the majority of young people, if they had a choice. Negative perceptions of agriculture are encouraged where parents use agricultural activities as a way of punishing or disciplining children, and where parents consider agriculture to be less worthwhile than other areas of study or economic activity.

Youth cannot be treated as homogenous group. It is important to keep in mind that youth is a social construct and youth are not a homogenous group. Indeed, there can be tremendous differences in the needs, demands and aspirations of young people, depending on gender, marital status, education level, origin, religion, culture, community dynamics and individual biographies among others. In addition, especially in development activities, there is a need to be careful not to exclude key actors due to age-based definitions of youth¹. Ensuring that very young people (under 15 years' old) have access to the right education and livelihood opportunities and that older youth between 25-40 years' of age have access to appropriate professional and livelihood opportunities are key to ensure that investments and support for young people between 15 and 24 years of age result in meaningful and sustainable impacts – both for youth and the society as a whole.

Disconnection between the services provided by RAS and the services needed by youth. Youth today are, on average, healthier, better educated, better connected and politically more engaged than previous generations. Technological progress, particularly internet and social media, have led to the fact that youth around the world tend to be better informed and have a clear ideas on their needs. However, prevalent approaches to extension and advisory services, governance frameworks and philosophies related to the individual, organisational and system levels in RAS are no longer equipped to properly respond to these aspirations, needs and demands of younger people.

Underinvestment in agricultural extension, RAS and knowledge sharing. Rural Advisory Services - and the knowledge sharing mechanisms, platforms and fora that are key to support youth to be more connected, informed and empowered to choose their own paths in life - are facing financial challenges in many parts of the world.

Policies, projects and programmes are often driven by bias and not by evidence. Often, organisations (including RAS providers) and policy makers start with excessively simplistic, biased and often rigid ideas on 'reality', rather than building perspectives and approaches based on evidence. For example, too often youth are seen as a homogenous group (see above), and reflections on the rural-urban divide are presented in a rigid way that overlooks the dynamics of the linkages that exist between rural and urban areas. Indeed, the discourse around extension is too often outdated, based on a linear model of agricultural innovations moving from research to extension and then passed onto to farmers, rather than taking a more systemic approach to understanding innovation processes and the actors involved in them. It would thus help to take a more context-specific and evidence-based approach in order to identify opportunities to increase the evidence-based nature of development policies and programmes.

3.2 Addressing the challenges: Make agriculture cool again!

Agriculture is not only farming. There is a need to ensure that agriculture is considered and appreciated as a whole, including but going beyond farming. In order to strengthen the role of agriculture in sustainable development, all relevant disciplines need to be considered. This would broaden the space for youth to be involved in, and take the lead in, agriculture, as there are entry points that go beyond farming: policy, education, research, finance, extension and RAS, communications and technology/trade, are all relevant domains in agriculture that need the energy and strength of the new generation.

Adopt integrated community approaches that take the whole person into account. A young person is also a women or a man, a daughter or a son, a grandchild and potentially a parent, a husband or a wife, and has a function and role to play in the family and the community. Youth are anchored in context-specific cultural and social dynamics. At the same time, they need different types of support from other people in the community to succeed (e.g. financial, material, practical, work and/or emotional). Hence, efforts to encourage youth to consider living in rural areas and working in agriculture cannot only focus on the opportunities provided to youth in terms of employment, income and/or career development.

¹ For example, the United Nations defines youth as people aged 15 -24 years old. The World Bank defines youth as people 15-35 years old.

They also need to address issues related to gender, intergenerational dynamics and community values in which youth are embedded. RAS therefore need to change approaches, looking beyond production and income to also examine the ways in which family and community development processes affect their strategies and activities. This dimension should also be reflected in development policies.

Promote inclusive value-chain approaches. Integrated approaches to agriculture need to include entrepreneurial activities along the whole value chain, both upstream and downstream. Indeed, empowering youth to use their creativity, motivation, engagement and innovation at different points along a value chain opens up opportunities for youth and other stakeholders in the value chain as a whole. However, this requires context-specific, inclusive and demand-driven models of entrepreneurship that are tailored both to the specific entry point in a value chain but also to the skills and interest of the concerned individual or group.

Adapt education and training. Education and training not only enables people to obtain the technical skills needed for their specialisation, but also be able to see the opportunities that lie in working in agriculture. Schools, universities, and education and training institutes can play key roles in encouraging students to have more positive attitudes towards agriculture. The points that follow are relevant.

- Education and learning efforts related to agriculture can begin already in nursery or primary school, and continue with lifelong learning opportunities, further education and training. This incremental approach facilitates learning, a sense of responsibility, work ethics and identity.
- Lectures and theoretical courses on agriculture are often not the most effective approach to engage and interest youth nor do they prepare them for the challenges and opportunities that they will face in their professional life in the labour market. Practice-oriented, hands-on training and apprenticeship can be more effective for certain young people and can potentially also make agriculture more attractive. This is relevant at all stages of education and can include the use of comics and games at nursery and primary schools, vocational training for young adults, and practical internships, taster opportunities, and field days during university studies.
- Engaging and working with role models or champions that have been successful and prosperous working in agriculture can help showcase the remunerative nature of job opportunities in agriculture as compared to those available in other sectors.
- Mentoring programmes for young people involved in agriculture have been tested in various countries and provide promising pathways to support and train youth in their endeavours.
- Young people need training in emerging areas and they need to develop the functional and technical skills required by the market and provide them with realistic potential for employment.
- Education and training institutions need to consider how ICTs can be used as platform to increase the quality and reach of education and training provided.

Policies and interventions need to be multi-faceted, context-specific and opportunity focused. Policies rarely adequately respond to the issues outlined above, and often the political will to implement necessary change is lacking. The following measures could be considered by policy makers.

- Widen the focus of agricultural policies to cover activities that go beyond production.
- Consider the importance of adequate policies in other sectors for rural youth. Policies that support investments in improved services for better rural livelihoods in terms of education, health, connectivity, and that provide better opportunities for youth to access land and natural resources, or that ensure appropriate investment in agricultural education and advisory services can all have a positive impact on the motivation and engagement of youth in rural areas and in agriculture.
- Embrace youth as key actors in policy making. Youth need to be included in all policy making processes to address their priorities. It is not sufficient to include youth as part of a quota. Youth should be involved as key actors in policy making and implementation, and their voice should count as much as those of the others. Older people can provide valuable contributions to this process of empowering youth in the role of mentors.
- Monitoring, evaluation and learning: More emphasis needs to be given to monitoring, evaluation and learning of the impacts of policies on youth. This evidence can help for policies to overcome bias and respond to the real needs and demands of rural youth and other stakeholders in agriculture. Policies need to be seen as part of a longer term process.

4. The roles of rural advisory services

Rural advisory services act as brokers and facilitators in agricultural innovation systems. As such they have roles to play in three key areas related to youth issues outlined above:

- Improving the image of agriculture as a profession;
- Providing adequate, effective, and high quality support to young people who are or want to be involved in agriculture; and
- Contributing to a conducive policy and social environment.

Concretely, RAS can take the following measures.

4.1 Changing perceptions of agriculture

- At the household and community levels, RAS can play a key role in shaping the image and perception of agriculture. Not only can they highlight and showcase the diversity of attractive entry points for youth in the agricultural sector for young people in rural households, but by working with role models or champions they can also demonstrate how agriculture can provide decent and remunerative employment, autonomy and improved livelihoods, etc.
- Create opportunities and entry points for improved education and learning. RAS can work with education and training institutes and facilitate and organise practical training, internships, fellowships, mentoring programmes, entry-level career opportunities for young people, contacts with role models, peer-learnings and other forms of practical involvement of young people in agriculture.

4.2 Provide adequate, effective and quality support to young people who are or want to be involved in agriculture

- Treat youth as fully empowered clients, with special needs and demands, as opposed to seeing them as simply beneficiaries of services defined by others in a top-down approach.
- Facilitate access to different service providers who can provide demand-driven training, educational, financial, emotional or other support for young people, within and outside the community.
- Collaborate with different actors to provide the best possible support and trainings to youth – partnerships between public, private and civil society organisations are a great opportunity to address issues in a cost-effective and sustainable manner.
- Take an integrated inclusive agricultural value-chain approach with a view to promoting innovative, remunerative and creative entry points for youth in agriculture.
- Facilitate access to innovation and entrepreneurial opportunities, including support in identifying potential business opportunities and relevant partners.

4.3 Develop programs for youth, with youth and by the youth – Creating a conducive enabling environment

- Support and advocate for an adequate range of development options available to youth and ensure that young people are seen by their families and communities as individuals with different aspirations and needs.
- Ensure that no one is left behind when planning development programmes, and make sure that there are approaches and pathways that meet the needs of all population groups.
- Influence the prevailing bias in communities which create obstacles for youth.
- Gather evidence and stories of impact from the local level to national policy makers.
- Provide a voice for young people in policy making processes, and facilitate opportunities for youth to be involved in policy making processes.

5. Capacities needed by RAS

Support to youth should be tailored to their specific needs and rural advisory services should seek to provide advice in the areas which are of interest to them and which provide demand-led employment and livelihood opportunities. In order for RAS to address this and to fulfil the above-mentioned roles and tasks, they need new approaches, models and capacities at individual, organisational and system levels.

- RAS need work in participatory ways which are demand driven and context-specific: RAS need to acquire both the capacity to understand that not all youth have similar interests, approaches to farming or constraints, hence it is necessary to adapt the respective tools and approaches to the needs of different groups of youth. RAS also need to learn to work with actors involved at different points in agricultural value chains. RAS should also look beyond working exclusively with individuals and small groups of people to working with collectives, communities and other relevant social groups in specific contexts.
- RAS should seek to adapt the content and language to the needs of the young clients.
- RAS need new technical skills which go beyond improving production techniques and productivity to include different skills and competences relevant at different points of an agricultural value chain.
- RAS also need new functional skills tailored to young people, which imply different approaches and methods to working with adults.
- Given the new demands of youth, RAS need to change their roles and functions from solely service providers to facilitators and brokers who are engaged in development processes and link relevant services to young people.
- RAS need to build up a network of actors and partnerships with service providers who are specialised in these domains if they are not able to provide the services demanded by youth.
- RAS need to learn to take up collaborative approaches in a pluralistic RAS system, where private, public and civil society organisations use each other's potential and strengths to provide a quality service and support to youth.
- ICTs bear tremendous opportunities to reach youth with quality advice and support. RAS therefore should make an effort to seize this opportunity and adapt their services and the innovations they share to a generation that is more at ease with digital technologies, while seeking to ensure that those without quality access to new technologies are not left behind.

6. Are young people better placed to reach youth? Engaging youth in RAS as part of the solution to address challenges

As evidence has shown that women extension workers reach women actors better, youth are more likely to reach youth in more direct and appropriate ways. Young people are more likely to understand the challenges and aspirations and/or contexts that their clients have grown up in, especially when coming from the same region or community. Young people are also often creative, innovative and have new ways of thinking, and therefore may be more likely to identify tailor-made solutions to the different needs as stated above. Indeed, many young people already undertake activities that could be considered types of extension (e.g. sharing new farming techniques on social media), but are not labelled as such. There is a need encourage these youth to identify themselves as extension agents, and in this way raise their profile in relation to extension and RAS.

However, for youth to be effective in RAS, they need to have real opportunities to undertake their agricultural activities informed by appropriate training, education and mentoring so that all those involved in extension and RAS – both younger and older people – are equipped with appropriate skills and competences. RAS also needs to become a competitive and remunerative employment and career opportunity for youth. Professionalisation of RAS can be helpful here.

7. The role of RAS Networks and Country Fora

RAS platforms, and communities of practice that are inclusive are critical to encourage coordination and collaboration across relevant stakeholders involved in agriculture on joint goals and visions. Organising RAS in regions and countries is in line with the wider promotion of more systemic approaches to RAS and can help with a variety of issues highlighted in this report, including: monitoring, evaluation and learning; making sure that every rural actor can access information on extension and extension workers operating

in the area; organising collaboration between organisations to address youth-related issues; such platforms and networks can open up a variety of opportunities for youth to enhance their involvement in agriculture and rural development.

Conclusions and recommendations

Two main conclusions emerged from the Annual Meeting:

Make agriculture cool again: It is necessary to work on different levels and with different approaches to make the agricultural sector competitive and attractive again to youth, and to ensure that opportunities in agriculture (that go beyond farming) are effectively communicated and promoted. Tailored practical education and training from early life are critical.

Work with youth as drivers for change: It is important to work *with* youth and not *for* youth, and to appreciate young people as equally valuable and respected contributors to processes. Too often, youth are not recognised as a valuable pool of experience, knowledge, skills, motivation and engagement that can help address contemporary challenges. However, this implies a change in values that needs to be fully embraced at all levels.

Concretely, the following recommendations were made by participants:

- Every effort need to be made to ensure that agriculture is perceived as valuable, competitive and attractive sector for youth;
- There is a need to develop more holistic, yet context-specific approaches that take into account the whole value chain or agricultural sub-sector, but also the different needs and demands of the youth;
- Youth need to be understood as clients, rather than as beneficiaries, and tools and approaches adapted accordingly;
- RAS need new specific technical and functional capacities to meet the demands of youth;
- RAS needs to evolve from service providers to facilitators of access to services and service provision;
- Professionalisation of RAS can have a positive impact on the capacity to address many challenges in agriculture related to youth, RAS, and rural-urban migration;
- More appropriate, practice-oriented training and education opportunities for youth in agriculture are needed;
- Organisations and policies need to move beyond project approaches and examine the possibility of holistic and systemic approaches;
- Youth can and need to be involved as valuable, respected, and accepted actors and contributors at all levels in processes related to agriculture;
- Youth have great potential to support RAS in addressing challenges;
- There needs to be greater government support for rural infrastructure development, provision of social and recreational facilities, communications and internet connectivity and market access to attract and encourage decent living in rural areas for youth.
- Regional RAS networks and country fora can play critical roles in promoting better coordination of efforts across different stakeholders that provide youth with access to information, services and people.