

DeSIRA Connect Workshop Kicks Off in Hanoi, Bringing Together Agricultural Innovators Across Asia-Pacific

Hanoi, 14 January 2025 – The three-day DeSIRA Connect Workshop officially commenced today in Hanoi, Vietnam, gathering over 60 participants, including researchers, policymakers, and agricultural innovators from across the Asia-Pacific region. The workshop, running from January 14 to 16, focuses on harnessing research and innovation to promote sustainable and inclusive transformations in agriculture and food systems.

The workshop was opened by Mr. Renaud Guillonnet, Manager of the Community of Action and Reflection of the DeSIRA Connect Community, who warmly welcomed participants and introduced special guests. Mr. Guillonnet highlighted the workshop's mission to advance collaboration and impactful innovation in agricultural systems.

Dr. Dao The Anh (DTA), Deputy Director General of the Vietnam Academy of Agricultural Science (VAAS), delivered opening remarks on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). Speaking to Vietnam's commitment to agroecological production and sustainable food systems, Dr. Anh noted the nation's significant achievement of USD 62 billion in agricultural exports despite post-COVID challenges. He emphasized that innovation with farmers and sustainable food systems are top priorities for MARD, further reinforced by the Prime Minister's recent announcement of a national strategy for science, technology, and digitalization in agriculture.

Representing the European Union (EU), Mr. Gonzalo Serrano, Deputy Head of Cooperation for the EU Delegation to Vietnam, underscored the importance of the DeSIRA Initiative. Funded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), the initiative has mobilized over EUR 100 million globally to support sustainable transformations in agriculture, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

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Mr. Serrano stressed DeSIRA's role in strengthening national and regional research and innovation systems while influencing policies such as Vietnam's Strategic Plan for Rural Development (2025-2030).

Dr. Murat Sartas, Chief Scaling and Impact Officer for the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), spoke about key challenges and opportunities for agricultural innovation in the region. He highlighted the importance of indigenous practices, climate-smart technologies, and strengthening organizational capacities to scale innovations. Dr. Sartas also noted the need for greater investment in underdeveloped areas, such as data-driven monitoring and evaluation frameworks, as well as AI-driven agricultural solutions.

Dr. Aurélie Toillier, Team Leader of DeSIRA-LIFT, emphasized the initiative's commitment to consolidating lessons learned across its 70 projects implemented in 68 countries. By fostering collaboration, monitoring, and innovation capacity, DeSIRA aims to transition its Community of Practice into a Community of Action and Reflection. She noted the workshop's focus on aligning DeSIRA outcomes with broader EU strategies and global priorities, contributing to long-term agricultural impact.

Participants will spend the next three days engaging in discussions, sharing insights, and identifying synergies to strengthen agricultural research and innovation systems. The workshop's outcomes will inform the final DeSIRA Connect event, scheduled to take place in Brussels in March.

About the DeSIRA Initiative The DeSIRA Initiative (Development-Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture) seeks to enhance inclusive, sustainable, and climate-relevant transformations in rural areas and agri-food systems. By strengthening agricultural innovation systems and addressing climate change challenges, DeSIRA contributes to the resilience and sustainability of agri-food systems in LMICs.

Summary of Opening Remarks at the DeSIRA Connect Workshop in Hanoi

Renaud Guillonnet, Manager – Community of Action and Reflection, DeSIRA Connect Community

Mr. Guillonnet opened the three-day event with a warm welcome to participants and special guests. He emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration and reflection within the DeSIRA community to address pressing challenges in food and agriculture systems. He also introduced the objectives of the workshop, aiming to strengthen the Community of Action and Reflection by sharing knowledge and aligning efforts for impactful agricultural innovation.

Dr. Dao The Anh (DTA), Deputy Director General, Vietnam Academy of Agricultural Science (VAAS)

Delivering remarks on behalf of Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), Dr. Dao extended apologies for the absence of Dr. Nguyen Do Anh Tuan, due to commitments related to the restructuring of MARD and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE). Dr. Dao highlighted Vietnam's strong commitment to research through international collaboration initiatives such as ASSET and STARFARM and the countries impressive agricultural exports, which reached USD 62 billion despite post-COVID challenges. He acknowledged the ongoing challenges facing the food system such as pollution, land degradation, and other vulnerabilities but reaffirmed Vietnam's dedication to agroecological production and sustainable food systems. He further emphasized that innovation with farmers is a high priority for MARD and noted the Prime Minister's recent announcement of a strategy to promote science, technology, innovation, and digitalization in agriculture.

Mr. Gonzalo Serrano, Deputy Head of Cooperation, EU Delegation to Vietnam

Mr. Serrano expressed gratitude to MARD and VAAS for their collaboration and underscored the importance of the DeSIRA Initiative, funded by the European Commission's DG INTPA. He highlighted that DeSIRA has mobilized over EUR 100 million globally to support sustainable agricultural transformations, not just in Asia and Vietnam but also in other regions. He emphasized DeSIRA's focus on research and innovation to support practitioners and organizations involved in food system transformation. Mr. Serrano noted DeSIRA's role in aligning with emerging strategies, such as innovation, SAT, and digitalization, and its contributions to Vietnam's Strategic Plan for Rural Development (2025-2030). He also acknowledged the initiative's efforts in capacity building for researchers and its alignment with the EU Global Strategy.

Dr. Murat Sartas, Chief Scaling and Impact Officer, APAARI

Dr. Sartas provided insights into the challenges and opportunities for agricultural innovation in the Asia-Pacific region. He highlighted the significance of exports such as rice and aquaculture, the role of indigenous agricultural practices, and the importance of climate-smart technologies. Dr. Sartas pointed to the need for traceability and transparency in food systems and noted the growth of homegrown agricultural businesses and agri-tech across Southeast Asia. He discussed the need for organizational capabilities to support innovation, particularly within ministries, small businesses, and industries, and stressed the importance of scaling technologies through infrastructure development. He also identified under-invested areas such as improving international collaboration frameworks, leveraging underestimated expertise from Europe, and investing in AI-driven solutions to advance agricultural innovation.

Dr. Aurélie Toillier, Team Leader, DeSIRA-LIFT

Dr. Toillier highlighted the achievements of the DeSIRA-LIFT initiative in consolidating lessons learned across 70 projects implemented in 68 countries. She emphasized the importance of fostering synergies and moving beyond project-based discussions to achieve long-term impact and systemic change. Dr. Toillier outlined four core capacity areas supported by DeSIRA-LIFT: fostering innovation, influencing agricultural systems, conducting real-time monitoring and evaluation, and achieving impact beyond project lifespans. She noted that the initiative has successfully transitioned a Community of Practice into a Community of Action and Reflection. Dr. Toillier encouraged participants to share their experiences to shape future strategies and align efforts with the EU's priorities and global sustainability goals. She concluded by highlighting the unique role of DeSIRA as a facility to coordinate between projects and the European Commission, facilitating collaboration and advancing a shared vision for sustainable agricultural innovation.

The opening remarks collectively set the stage for three days of meaningful discussions and collaboration, aiming to strengthen agricultural innovation systems, address pressing food system challenges, and contribute to sustainable development in Vietnam and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Summary of Keynote Presentation: Reshaping the Contribution of Research to Agricultural Innovation

Dr. Fergus Sinclair, from Bangor University and Co-Convenor of TPP, delivered an insightful keynote address titled "Reshaping the Contribution of Research to Agricultural Innovation." The presentation outlined a transformative approach to innovation in agricultural research, emphasizing the need to move beyond traditional dissemination models to systems-based, scalable solutions.

Key Highlights:

- **Scaling Innovation Through Co-Creation:** Dr. Sinclair emphasized the importance of regenerative agriculture, involving co-creation and knowledge sharing at scale. Building on insights from a DeSIRA workshop in Kigali, he outlined five critical steps to drive innovation while incorporating feedback and interactions across diverse systems.
- **Step 1: Food Security and Nutrition as Priorities**
 - Agroecological approaches have been shown to improve food security and nutrition locally.
 - Addressing reliance on chemical fertilizers and transitioning to biological nitrogen sources require comprehensive food system transformations.
 - The "Options by Context" (OxC) framework was highlighted as a participatory approach to testing and scaling solutions tailored to local contexts.
- **Step 2: Embracing Diversification for Sustainability**
 - Dr. Sinclair presented evidence from global meta-analyses showing that diversification enhances productivity and ecosystem services.
 - Examples included nitrogen-fixing trees to reduce chemical inputs and mixed crop systems like coffee, pepper, and fruit trees in Vietnam, which have led to improved income, environmental outcomes, and resilience.
- **Step 3: Developing Inclusive Value Networks**
 - A shift from value chains to value networks was advocated to ensure equitable agency for producers and consumers.
 - Co-creation of new crops, products, and markets alongside diversification was identified as critical to success.
- **Step 4: Reducing Food Loss and Waste**
 - Strategies for circular economics, including recycling and reducing waste, were presented as vital components of sustainable food systems.
- **Step 5: Participatory Knowledge and Governance**
 - Facilitating participatory knowledge-sharing and community governance across public and private sectors and scales is essential for effective implementation.

Addressing Systemic Challenges: Dr. Sinclair identified a "missing middle" in food system transformation at the sub-national and local landscape levels. He called for strengthened policies, processes, and capacities to address this gap. The use of multi-stakeholder platforms and innovative governance mechanisms was recommended to bridge this divide.

In conclusion, Dr. Sinclair's keynote emphasized that transforming agricultural research to support innovation requires a holistic, participatory approach, grounded in diverse, context-specific strategies. This transformation must address systemic issues while fostering equitable collaboration and sustainable practices at all levels.

Summary of Panel Session 1: Reshaping the Contribution of Research to Agricultural Innovation

Panel Session 1 brought together leaders in agricultural research and innovation to discuss strategies for enhancing research contributions to agricultural innovation systems. Below are key insights and takeaways from the panel discussion, highlighting contributions from the panellists and their respective organizations.

Panel Highlights

1. Pascal Lienhard, CIRAD – Research in Agroecology and Food Systems in Southeast Asia

Pascal Lienhard from CIRAD addressed the evolution of agroecological and food systems research in Southeast Asia. CIRAD remains committed to applied, action-oriented research, emphasizing local farmer engagement and long-term experiments, such as studies on soil carbon dynamics. Recent shifts include:

- Greater engagement with policymakers, private-sector actors, and local stakeholders to support scaling efforts.
- Focus on agrobiodiversity to address climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- Development of incentive mechanisms for farmers to transition to agroecological practices and market systems.
- Emphasis on integrating transdisciplinary research to transform food systems and promote sustainable agricultural practices.

2. Oliver Oliveiros, Agroecology Coalition – Agroecology as a Transformative Innovation

Oliver Oliveiros discussed the Agroecology Coalition's multistakeholder efforts to promote agroecology (AE) as a pathway to sustainable food system transformation. He highlighted the transformative nature of AE as a practice, science, and social movement. Key points included:

- Growing global and sub-national AE strategies, such as national policies and regional guidelines.
- Integration of AE systems with education, financing, and political structures to support healthy, profitable food systems.
- The importance of financing mechanisms and equitable inclusion of farmers in AE research and policy discussions.

3. Dr. Murat Sartas, APAARI – Promoting Innovation Through Research

Dr. Sartas of APAARI focused on the organization's role in addressing challenges in agricultural innovation, particularly within national agricultural research systems (NARS). He emphasized:

- The need for systemic approaches and intelligent systems to make scaling innovations effective.
- Leveraging AI and digital tools to enhance extension services and support scaling.
- Addressing capacity and funding gaps while facilitating knowledge sharing among regional stakeholders.

4. Dr. Dao The Anh, VAAS – Agricultural Research and Innovation in Vietnam

Dr. Dao shared insights on the evolution of agricultural research in Vietnam and its connection to regional and global trends. Key takeaways included:

- VAAS's role in supporting international research cooperation and direct knowledge transfer to farmers.
- The importance of integrating bottom-up and top-down approaches to scale innovations effectively.
- The role of platforms like MALICA in scaling agroecology and food system transformation.
- Emphasis on leveraging international funding to complement national government support.

5. Sylvain Ouillon, IRD – Cooperation in Research in the Asian Context

Sylvain Ouillon highlighted IRD's integrated approach to agricultural research in Mekong countries, focusing on seven innovation pathways for rice-based systems, including:

- Crop diversification, soil and plant health, water management, and sustainable rice systems.
- Decision support tools and simulation scenarios to address territorial food system transformations.
- Capacity development and support for local stakeholders to adopt agroecological practices.

Key Takeaway Messages from Panelists

- **Participatory Research and Long-Term Partnerships:** Embedding participatory research into agricultural systems ensures ownership and long-term impact. Sustained partnerships are crucial for addressing complex challenges.
- **Youth and Gender Empowerment:** Attracting youth to agroecology and addressing barriers faced by women in agriculture are essential for inclusive transformation.
- **Scaling Innovations:** Scaling agroecological practices requires systemic approaches, regional collaboration, and intelligent use of digital tools and AI.
- **Private Sector Engagement:** Encouraging private-sector investment in agroecology necessitates policy frameworks that provide incentives and include SMEs.
- **Bridging the "Missing Middle":** Addressing gaps in local governance, policy implementation, and capacity at sub-national levels is critical for scaling food system transformations.

Discussion Highlights

- **AI in Agricultural Research:** Panelists debated AI's potential to accelerate research processes and generate predictive insights. While AI offers transformative opportunities, concerns were raised about its limitations in simulating complex, context-specific systems.
- **Incentivizing Agroecology:** A supportive policy environment (e.g., polluters pay) and innovative funding mechanisms are required to promote AE adoption.
- **Private Sector Collaboration:** Engagement should not be limited to multinationals but include SMEs, which play a significant role in innovation and capacity building.
- **Investment in Research:** With a high return on investment (23%), sustained funding is critical, though strategies to shorten the impact timeline are needed.

Conclusion

The session highlighted the need for systemic, participatory approaches to reshape agricultural research and innovation. Collaborative frameworks, regional partnerships, and the integration of new technologies like AI can drive the scaling of agroecological practices and food system transformation. The importance of inclusivity, capacity building, and private-sector engagement emerged as critical components for ensuring sustainable and impactful agricultural innovation.

Keynote Summary: How to Accompany Farmer-Led Innovation Processes

Presented by Katja Vuori, CEO of Agricorn

Katja Vuori's keynote highlighted the pivotal role of farmer-led innovations (FO) in driving agricultural transformation, emphasizing the importance of grounding innovations in the realities of farming families. She underscored the diversity of farmers and farmer organizations, noting that innovation processes must be tailored to their specific circumstances to achieve meaningful impact. Vuori stressed farmers should not be treated as a homogeneous group, (which they often are) and emphasized that acknowledging their heterogeneity, unique needs and priorities is essential for effective scaling and implementation.

Agricorn's Farmer-Led Innovation (FORI) framework consists of five components: advocacy and lobbying, methodological development, coordination, action research, and ad-hoc projects. Vuori acknowledged that despite having guidelines for farmer-led research, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, as each context requires a nuanced understanding of local dynamics and power relations. She emphasized the need for capacity building and equitable collaboration, while also addressing historical power imbalances that often hinder effective partnerships.

Vuori highlighted Agricorn's achievements in scaling farmer-led innovations, reaching 300,000 farmers through cost-effective programs that also reshape extension systems. She emphasized the importance of public funding and private investment, while noting the lack of business incentives that often deter private sector engagement in agroecological transitions. She concluded by advocating for explicit scaling strategies, capacity development, and sustained support to ensure the longevity and impact of FO initiatives.

Key Points from the Q&A Session

A participant from Pakistan emphasized the importance of demonstrations in building trust among farmers, noting that farmers often only believe what they can see. Vuori agreed, highlighting the need for practical, observable innovations to foster engagement.

A representative from WorldFish noted that small-scale farmers face significant barriers, including daily earnings reliance and the costs of organizing collectively. Vuori acknowledged these challenges and stressed the importance of providing incentives and reducing barriers to participation.

Pascal inquired about Agricord's methods for justifying FO results. Vuori explained that Agricord employs a team of FO specialists and relies on financial and technical reporting overseen by FOs during the project's initial stages. This approach ensures a comprehensive and tailored monitoring process.

Phouttasinh Phimmachanh from the Lao Farmer Network described their community-led research approach, which aligns research efforts with community needs and facilitates problem-solving through local engagement. Vuori applauded this method, emphasizing its effectiveness in addressing specific challenges over time.

A participant from the Philippines highlighted three key principles: integrating research, government, and farmer organizations; focusing on evidence-based policy engagement; and fostering grassroots technological innovation. Another Filipino attendee stressed the importance of success indicators, inclusive dialogue with policymakers, and empowering FOs to advocate for farmer interests.

Vuori concluded by reiterating the importance of capacity building, transparent communication, and fostering farmer organizations as key players in innovation and policy engagement. Her presentation and the subsequent discussion provided valuable insights into the strategies and challenges of scaling farmer-led innovations effectively.