



Farmer- and Farmers' Organisation-led
Research and Innovation in Agroecology (FORI)

RESEARCH, DIFFERENTLY

Rebalancing knowledge and power for agroecological innovation
Insights from the SACAU-AgriCord webinar series

Farmers Organisations Leading Research & Innovation on Agroecology for Sustainable Food Systems (FORI) is financed by the European Union and Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States.



The views, analyses, and conclusions presented in this report are those of the contributors and authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions, policies, or opinions of the FORI programme's donors, regional farmers' organisations, supporting agri-agencies, or mandating organisations. Any errors or omissions are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Version 1

September 2026

Conceptualised and curated by

Katja VUORI, Ishmael SUNGA, Martin AGBOTON, Tlotlisang NKHASE

Editing and layout by Victor ROOSEN, Lukas HADASCH

Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions (SACAU)

P.O Box 10480

Centurion, 0046

Pretoria, South Africa

info@sacau.org

www.sacau.org

AgriCord

Rue de Treves 61

1040 Brussels, Belgium

info@agricord.org

www.agricord.org

Table of contents

Executive summary.....	V
1. Purpose and scope of the series	2
2. What farmer-led research is (not).....	2
3. What farmer-led research achieves	3
Relevance drives adoption	4
Trust as a scaling mechanism.....	4
Building a culture of curiosity	4
Evidence builds confidence and credibility.....	5
Evidence from different contexts	5
4. How to develop relationships and reform epistemic power?.....	6
Unlearning entrenched roles.....	6
New competencies for co-research	7
The critical role of farmers' organisations	7
Rethinking the role of researchers	8
Beyond individual change: transforming institutions	8
Rebalancing power	8
More than agronomy	9
5. How can farmer-led research be organized?	10
Participation evolves along a continuum	10
Inclusion, power and diversity	11
Learning by doing.....	12
Farmers' organisations as the backbone of co-research	12
Building communities of learning	12
From research to advocacy	13
Scaling through networks rather than replication	13
Key lessons for practice	14
6. What must change in policies, institutions and funding systems.....	15
Redefining what success looks like.....	15
Investing in farmers' organisations as innovation actors	16
Public institutions and long-term sustainability	16
Intellectual property, knowledge governance and farmers' rights.....	17
Towards more democratic innovation systems	18
Acknowledgements.....	19
Annex: Webinar Contributions.....	20

Portrait images: SACAU, Google Scholar, EFAO, ILRI, IIED

All images depicting farmers and activities were produced in the context of AgriCord programmes. All rights belong to AgriCord, its agri-agencies and partnering farmers' organisations if not indicated otherwise. Do not reproduce without consent.

Acronyms

CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
CNOP-CAM	Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes au Cameroun
EFAO	Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario
EU	European Union
FO	farmers' organisation
FO-RI / FORI	Farmer-led Research and Innovation in Agroecology (programme)
GFAiR	Global Forum on Agricultural Innovation and Research
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
ILRI	International Livestock Research Institute
INERA	Institut de l'Environnement et de Recherches Agricoles
MVIWAARUSHA	Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima na Wafugaji Mkoa wa Arusha
OACPS	Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States
PAFO	Pan-African Farmers' Organization
R&I	research and innovation
SACAU	Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions

Executive summary

“Who defines the research we want, and for whom?”

Research that is not designed with farmers cannot claim to serve them. Farmer-led research is not primarily a different research methodology. It is a different distribution of power over knowledge.

Closing the second webinar, **Mr. Ishmael Sunga, CEO of SACAUI**, distilled the ambition of the webinar series into a desire to create *“a community culture of sharing knowledge and experience.”* Across the three webinars, participants converged around a simple but transformative proposition: **if research is to serve farmers, farmers must co-define and co-design it.**

The series generated several key messages:

- Farmer-led co-research means that farmers and their organisations co-define research priorities and agendas and actively shape the research process.
- Farmer-led research is scientific in its own right. It does not mean farmers work alone, nor does it diminish the role of researchers.
- Superficial participation is not enough. Research cannot be considered farmer-led if farmers are consulted but excluded from agenda-setting and decision-making.
- The greatest challenge is not technical but relational. Researchers and farmers alike must unlearn entrenched roles and develop new ways of working together.
- The most critical competencies are soft skills: listening, trust-building, facilitation, communication, adaptability and conflict management.
- Power asymmetries must be deliberately addressed through equitable partnerships, direct funding of farmers’ organisations, transparent governance and shared decision-making.
- Researchers need to shift from being providers of solutions to partners in inquiry and co-learning.
- Farmers’ organisations play a pivotal role as knowledge brokers, coordinators, conveners, advocates and scaling mechanisms.
- Research systems need new success metrics that go beyond publications and scientific outputs to include relevance, adoption, empowerment and social change.
- Farmer-led research drives adoption at scale because it responds to farmers’ own priorities and builds ownership of both the process and the outcomes.

Ultimately, the series challenged a fundamental assumption that still shapes many research systems: that innovation flows primarily from researchers to farmers. The evidence presented suggests a different model. **In this model innovation emerges through collaboration between farmers, farmers’ organisations and researchers.** Each of them contributes distinct but equally valuable forms of knowledge and competencies.

1. Purpose and scope of the series

“Who defines the research we want, and for whom?” This question lies at the heart of current debates about agricultural research, innovation and agroecological transformation.

The webinar series was jointly organized by SACAUI and AgriCord as part of the Farmer Organisation Research and Innovation (FORI) programme (2022–2026). This programme, managed and methodologically accompanied by AgriCord and its member agri-agencies, supports thirteen action-research projects led by farmers’ organisations at national and sub-national levels. The concrete research is complemented by advocacy, methodological support and knowledge-sharing activities coordinated by PAFO and the regional farmers’ organisations.

This webinar series sought to generate evidence and lessons for policy dialogue while exploring three interrelated questions:

- How is farmer-led research understood by farmers and farmers’ organisations?
- What competencies do farmers, farmers’ organisations and researchers need to engage effectively in farmer-led co-research?
- How can power imbalances in farmer-researcher partnerships be addressed to create more equitable and effective collaboration?

Taken together, the discussions reveal that farmer-led research is not simply a different methodology. It represents a broader shift in how knowledge is recognized and generated, whose knowledge counts, and who has the power to shape research agendas and innovation pathways.

2. What farmer-led research is (not)

The most consistent message across the discussions was definitional: research is farmer-led only when farmers and their organisations influence what is researched, how it is researched, and how the resulting knowledge is used. In conventional research systems, agenda-setting power typically resides with researchers, universities, donors or government institutions. Farmer-led research challenges this model by positioning farmers as active contributors to the generation of knowledge.

As Mr. Sunga observed, farmers are too often treated as “invitees rather than agenda-setters.” Farmer-led research seeks to reverse this dynamic. Farmer leadership does not necessarily mean that farmers undertake every stage of research themselves. Rather, it means that farmers influence the identification of problems, formulation of questions, design of experiments, interpretation of findings and application of results. The central criterion is not who performs specific tasks, but who shapes decisions. Involving farmers in data collection or field experimentation does not automatically make research farmer-led if key decisions remain concentrated elsewhere.

***Farmers are too often
treated as invitees
rather than agenda-setters***

- Ishmael Sunga, SACAUI CEO



Equally important was clarifying what farmer-led research is not. Farmer-led research does not reject science, scientific methods or the role of researchers. On the contrary, participants stressed the value of combining scientific expertise with farmers' experiential knowledge. As Dr. Fetien Abera, senior scientist at South Carolina State University, explained: "There is knowledge known to farmers, knowledge known to researchers, and crucially a shared blind spot that can only be explored together." Farmer-led research therefore does not imply farmers working in isolation. Rather, it creates forms of collaboration in which scientific and technical expertise and farmers' experiential knowledge generate insights and innovations that neither could produce independently.

The proliferation of terms such as participatory research, farmer-centric research, action research, living labs, participatory technology development and farmer field schools was highlighted. The speakers cautioned that participation is often more visible in project proposals and reports than in actual decision-making processes. Dr. Abay warned that participatory language can be also used "cosmetically", masking research processes in which farmers remain largely excluded from important decisions. Farmer-led research sets a higher bar. It seeks not only participation, but meaningful influence.

There is knowledge known to farmers, knowledge known to researchers, and crucially a shared blind spot that can only be explored together.

- Dr. Fetien Abera, Crop Scientist



3. What farmer-led research achieves

A recurring question was whether farmer-led research delivers better outcomes than more conventional approaches. While participants acknowledged that evidence remains limited and context-specific, experiences from the FORI programme and examples shared by the speakers and the participants from Africa and beyond pointed to a consistent conclusion: farmer-led research works because it starts from farmers' realities, builds ownership, and strengthens capacity to innovate beyond projects. Farmers led research recognizes that farmers have always experimented, adapted and developed innovations in response to changing conditions. Many practices now described as agroecological innovations are rooted in forms of knowledge and experimentation that farming communities have developed over generations. Recognizing farmers as active problem-solvers and knowledge holders has implications not only for the quality of research but especially for the relevance, adoption and sustainability of its outcomes.

Relevance drives adoption

The most frequently cited advantage of farmer-led research was its ability to address the questions that matter most to farmers. Conventional research agendas are often shaped by academic priorities, donor interests or policy objectives. While these priorities may be important, they do not always align with the immediate challenges farmers face in their fields, households and markets. As a result, innovations struggle to gain traction because they fail to respond to farmers' actual needs.

Farmer-led research begins with different premises. Research questions emerge from farmers' observations, challenges and aspirations. Because farmers co-define the problem, they are more likely to trust the process and apply the findings. Dr. Sarah Larsen of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario summarized: "Farmer-led research helps farmers answer their questions instead of going along with what an agri-business salesperson tells them."

Farmer-led research helps farmers answer their questions instead of going along with what an agri-business salesperson tells them.

- Dr. Sarah Larsen, EFAO



This ownership explains why farmer-led research translates more readily into practical action. Adoption is not a separate step following research. It is built into the process from the beginning.

Trust as a scaling mechanism

Farmers learn most effectively from other farmers with trust being the strongest determinant for the adoption of new practices. While researchers and extension services play important roles, farmers often place greater confidence in evidence generated by people facing similar conditions and constraints.

Farmer-led research facilitated and coordinated by farmers' organisations provides mechanisms for this type of peer-to-peer learning. Extension systems including farmer field schools, local innovation platforms and demonstration plots allow knowledge to spread through social networks that already exist within farming communities. Such mechanisms spread not only innovations but also strengthens collective learning and problem-solving capacities within farming communities.

Building a culture of curiosity

An important outcome of farmer-led research is the development of farmers' analytical and investigative capacities. Several speakers argued that farmers are natural researchers. Every season they observe, test, compare and adapt their practices in response to changing conditions. Farmer-led research builds on these existing capacities while introducing more systematic approaches to observation, experimentation and analysis.

Dr. Larsen described this process as creating a “culture of curiosity.” Rather than simply promoting recommended practices, farmer-led research encourages farmers to ask questions, test assumptions and generate evidence of their own. This culture extends beyond individual experiments. By participating in farmer-led research, farmers become more confident in interpreting data, comparing alternatives and making informed decisions. The most valuable outcome may not be a specific innovation but the strengthened capacity to innovate.

Evidence builds confidence and credibility

Participants emphasized that the discipline of conducting research generates benefits even when experiments do not produce the expected results. Structured observation, data collection and reflection develop farmers’ analytical skills and a deeper understanding of their production systems. Failed trials provide valuable insights and contribute to future improvements.

Evidence strengthens farmers' confidence and legitimacy. When farmers can demonstrate results using documented observations and data, their knowledge gains visibility and credibility among peers, policymakers and researchers. As Mr. Damian Sulumo, Programmes Officer, MVIWAARUSHA observed: “Their farms come to speak louder than farmers themselves.”

Their farms come to speak louder than farmers themselves.

- Damian Sulumo, MVIWAARUSHA on farmer-generated evidence



Evidence from different contexts

One striking feature was the consistency of experiences shared from very different contexts. Participants from Tanzania, Burundi, Cameroon and Canada described remarkably similar dynamics despite operating in different agroecological, institutional and socio-economic environments. In each case presented, farmer-led approaches increased farmer engagement, strengthened learning processes and improved the relevance of research outcomes.

Mr. Sulumo brought into discussions an example from Tanzania, describing how MVIWAARUSHA has developed local research networks supported by trained farmer-researchers. The model combines comparative field trials, farmer field schools, regular feedback sessions and innovation platforms coordinated by MVIWAARUSHA allowing lessons to be shared and adapted. Dr. Larsen described collaborative farmer-led variety trials from Canada. These experiences suggest that farmer-led research is not a context-specific anomaly, relying for example on certain formal educational levels of farmers, but a broadly applicable approach.

4. How to develop relationships and reform epistemic power?

If the benefits of farmer-led research are increasingly evident, why do conventional research approaches continue to dominate? The discussions returned to the same answer: the greatest barriers are not technical. The challenge lies in changing deeply embedded assumptions about who generates knowledge, who makes decisions, and whose expertise is valued. Farmer-led research requires more than new research methods. It requires a shift in relationships between farmers, farmers' organisations, researchers, funders and public institutions. This shift must happen at the individual, organisational and systemic levels.

Unlearning entrenched roles

Participants consistently argued that the most difficult part of transitioning to farmer-led research is not acquiring new knowledge but unlearning old habits. For many farmers, particularly those with limited formal education, years of exposure to top-down extension and development approaches have reinforced the idea that expertise resides elsewhere. Farmers may possess extensive knowledge and experience but lack confidence in their ability to formulate research questions, challenge assumptions or engage researchers as equals.

Researchers face a different but equally significant challenge. Academic training often positions them as experts whose role is to generate knowledge and deliver solutions. Farmer-led research asks them to step back from this role and engage instead as partners in inquiry.

Several speakers reflected on personal experiences that challenged these assumptions. Dr. Abay described how working with a farmer-breeder whose varieties outperformed officially released cultivars forced her to reconsider conventional understandings of expertise and innovation. Similarly, Dr. Patrice Ndimanya of the University of Burundi argued that the transition requires nothing less than a "revolution in how researchers are trained" and pointed out that existing institutional cultures in research institutions and ministries might sometimes reinforce resistance to participatory approaches.

The transition requires nothing less than a revolution in how researchers are trained. [...] I go to the farmers to learn every day.

- Dr. Patrice Ndimanya,
University of Burundi



New competencies for co-research

A consistent finding from the surveys carried out within the FORI programme, as well as the webinar discussions suggest that main competency gaps are not technical. Technical skills such as soil analysis, ecological assessment, GPS mapping, research protocols, monitoring systems and data management are important and can be acquired as needed. The more significant challenge lies in developing the interpersonal and facilitation skills required.

Farmer-led research begins with understanding farmers' realities rather than testing predefined solutions. This requires researchers and facilitators to listen carefully, suspend assumptions and invest time in dialogue. Such conversations help distinguish between problems that can be addressed through research and those that require policy, market or institutional solutions.

Co-creation depends on relationships in which participants feel respected, heard and able to take risks. Trust develops through repeated interactions, transparency and the delivery of commitments over time. Meaningful farmer-led research is therefore difficult to reconcile with short project cycles and narrowly defined deliverables.

Researchers must be able to engage with farmers as equal partners. This requires the ability to communicate scientific concepts in accessible ways while also translating farmers' experiential and often undocumented knowledge into forms that can be shared, analysed and used within research and policy processes.

Disagreement should not be viewed as a sign of failure. On the contrary, conflict can indicate that people trust one another enough to express differing views openly. Managing such tensions constructively requires facilitation skills that are rarely taught in scientific training but are essential for collaborative innovation.

Farmer-led research unfolds in unpredictable environments. Climatic events, changing farmer priorities, market fluctuations and evolving local conditions can all require adjustments to research plans. Successful co-research depends on flexibility and a willingness to adapt methods and expectations as circumstances evolve.

The critical role of farmers' organisations

One of the clearest findings emerging both from the webinar series, as well as the FORI survey, was the role of farmers' organisations as intermediaries between farmers, researchers, policymakers and other actors. Many of the roles and competencies required for farmer-led research are not necessarily located within individual farmers or researchers but within farmers' organisations. Throughout the FORI programme, farmers' organisations have acted as conveners, facilitators, knowledge brokers, coordinators, advocates and scaling mechanisms.

Their proximity to farming communities allows them to identify priorities and mobilize participation. At the same time, their organisational capacity enables them to engage with researchers, donors and policymakers.

Rethinking the role of researchers

Farmer-led research does not reduce the importance of researchers. Rather, it redefines their role. Instead of acting primarily as generators and transmitters of knowledge, researchers become facilitators of joint learning and co-designers of innovation processes. Dr. Ndimanya captured this shift in a simple but powerful reflection: "I go to the farmers to learn every day."

Dr. Cargele Masso, Principal Scientist, ILRI, identified trust, contextual understanding and long-term commitment as the foundations of such collaboration. Genuine co-creation depends on recognizing farmers' experiential knowledge as equal to scientific knowledge and replacing extractive practices with processes of co-learning.

Trust, contextual understanding and long-term commitment is the foundation for such collaboration.

- Dr. Cargele Masso, ILRI



Beyond individual change: transforming institutions

While individual attitudes and competencies matter, they are not enough. Ms. Katja Vuori, CEO, AgriCord noted that farmer-led research challenges institutional structures that have historically evolved around different assumptions about how knowledge is produced and validated. Universities, research institutes and funding agencies often reward rapid publication, project delivery and narrowly defined scientific outputs. Farmer-led research, by contrast, depends on long-term engagement, iterative learning and relationship-building. This creates a structural mismatch.

Several speakers argued that academic curricula should be revised to better prepare researchers for participatory and transdisciplinary work. Equally important, performance assessment systems need to recognize forms of impact that extend beyond academic publication. Research success should not be measured solely by the number of papers published or degrees awarded. It should also be assessed in terms of relevance, adoption, empowerment, strengthened capacities and contributions to broader food-system transformation.

Rebalancing power

Unequal power relations remain the single greatest obstacle to effective farmer-researcher collaboration. Conventional research systems concentrate decision-making authority, financial resources and agenda-setting power within research institutions and donor organisations. Farmers are often invited to participate only after key decisions have already been made. Farmer-led research seeks to reverse this pattern. GFAiR-endorsed Partnership Principles highlight four dimensions of equitable collaboration.

Partnerships must begin with a shared understanding of the context, stakeholders and power relations that shape collaboration. Farmers should be involved in defining priorities from the

outset rather than being consulted after agendas have been established. Long-term trust, mutual respect and two-way learning are prerequisites for meaningful collaboration.

Equitable partnerships require transparency regarding budgets, roles and decision-making authority. Redistribution of resources is often necessary if power imbalances are to be addressed in practice rather than merely acknowledged. Partnership quality should be monitored throughout the research process. Transparent governance, reciprocity and shared accountability are essential components of fair co-creation. Farmers' organisations coordinating projects and managing resources does not eliminate power asymmetries but can create conditions for more balanced collaboration and accelerate transition towards more farmer-led approaches.

More than agronomy

Farmer-led approaches are increasingly accepted in agronomic experimentation, where farmers and researchers can jointly test practices, varieties and technologies. However, the greatest untapped potential may lie elsewhere. Applying farmer-led approaches to socioeconomic research, value-chain analysis, market development and policy questions is often more complex because these issues involve a wider range of actors, interests and power relations.

Yet these are also the areas where farmer-led research may have the greatest potential to influence the structural conditions that shape farmers' livelihoods.

Focus on socio-economic aspects and different parts of value chain is also a way to engage younger generations. Youth is often less attracted to primary production alone are strongly interested in opportunities linked to processing, marketing, digital technologies and entrepreneurship. Mr. Sulumo described how value-chain related research on honey processing and sunflower oil production provided entry points for youth engagement in co-innovation in Tanzania.



5. How can farmer-led research be organized?

While the principles of farmer-led research are increasingly well understood, implementing them remains a work in progress. There is no single model. Farmer-led research can take many forms depending on the context, research question, capacities involved and institutional environment. Nevertheless, the discussions revealed several practical lessons about how farmer-led research can be organized and how meaningful co-research can develop over time.

Participation evolves along a continuum

One important lesson emerging is that farmer leadership does not require farmers to participate equally in every stage of every research process. Research activities vary. Some require highly specialized scientific expertise, advanced laboratory facilities or sophisticated analytical methods. Others are readily accessible to farmers and can be led directly by farming communities and their organisations. Flexible approach that allows farmers to engage meaningfully according to the nature of research and their interests, capacities and priorities need to apply. The objective is not to maximize farmers' participation in every activity, but to maximize their influence over the research process and the usefulness of the knowledge generated.

The speakers emphasized that participation should be viewed as a dynamic process as capacities develop. Farmers can begin by contributing their observations and current knowledge and practices which shape the identification of research priorities. They can play an active role in field trials, considering their other responsibilities and time constraints. Over time, as confidence and skills grow, supported by farmers' organisation extensionists, farmers assume more autonomous



role for experimental design, data collection, analysis and dissemination of emerging practices and innovations. Dr. Larsen illustrated this type of approach applied in multi-farm variety trials conducted by members of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario.

Similarly, Dr. Abay noted that in plant breeding research farmers may not always be directly involved during the earliest stages, where large populations and specialized techniques are required. However, they can become active co-researchers at later stages when varieties are being evaluated under real farming conditions and selection decisions become more directly linked to farmers' needs and preferences. These examples suggest that meaningful farmer leadership can take different forms in different types of innovation processes.

Inclusion, power and diversity



An important learning from the discussions was that farmer-led co-research cannot assume that all farmers automatically participate equally or benefit equally. Power dynamics do not exist only between researchers and farmers. They also exist within farming communities and farmers' organisations. Hence the importance of deliberately creating space for women and young people to participate in defining research priorities, conducting research and shaping innovation processes. Without such efforts, farmer-led approaches risk reproducing existing inequalities rather than transforming them.

Dr. Abay emphasized that women should be treated not merely as participants but as co-owners of innovation processes. Drawing on her experience working with farmer organisations and seed systems, she shared a practical lesson from a research project where women had initially been excluded from training activities. The result was that implementation stalled because key decisions and day-to-day farm management responsibilities often rested with women. Similarly, young people bring different perspectives, skills and aspirations to agricultural innovation.

Learning by doing

A recurring message was that research competencies are developed through practice. Participants cautioned against the idea that extensive training or capacity building must precede farmers' participation in co-research. Instead, engagement in research itself becomes a powerful learning process and sharpens farmers' research skills. The value of farmer-led research lies not only in the technical findings but also in the experience of systematically investigating questions and interpreting results. Also, unsuccessful trials are as valuable as successful ones. The discipline of documenting observations, comparing outcomes and reflecting on unexpected results strengthens farmers' analytical capacities regardless of the outcome of trials.



Farmers' organisations as the backbone of co-research

Across the FORI programme, farmers' organisations emerged as the central enabling factor for successful farmer-led research. Farmers' organisations facilitate the identification of research priorities and the existing practices and translate between different knowledge systems. They build trust by helping researchers to understand farmers' realities while supporting farmers to navigate experimentations and unfamiliar institutional contexts.

Farmers' organisations provide continuity that individual projects and researchers often cannot. The emerging results from FORI confirm that farmer-led research becomes effective and starts to scale when farmers' organisations are coordinators of research initiatives, including managing budgets and contractual relationships with research partners. Such arrangements help ensure that accountability remains rooted in farmers' priorities rather than external agendas.

Building communities of learning

Several examples presented during the webinars demonstrated that farmer-led research works best when it is embedded within collective learning structures. Farmer field schools, innovation platforms, farmer-researcher networks and peer learning groups create opportunities for reflection, exchange and adaptation. They enable farmers to compare experiences, challenge assumptions and refine innovations collectively. Mr. Sulumo illustrated how this was organized in Tanzania through local farmer networks supported by trained farmer-researchers. Such

structures help transform isolated experiments into broader processes of social learning and innovation.

From research to advocacy

An important feature of the FORI approach is that research is not viewed as an end in itself. Evidence generated through farmer-led research strengthens the voice and influence of farmers' organisations in policy processes. This is particularly important in the context of agroecological transitions, where farmers' experiences often remain underrepresented in policy debates because they remain anecdotal. Farmer-led research therefore serves a dual function. It generates practical solutions to immediate challenges while also producing evidence that can inform broader discussions about agricultural development, food systems and public investment priorities.



Scaling through networks rather than replication

The webinars also challenged conventional assumptions about scaling. Traditional approaches often focus on replicating a predefined solution across larger areas. Farmer-led research suggests a different model. Rather than scaling technologies, participants emphasized the importance of scaling capacities, relationships and learning processes. The objective is not necessarily to persuade farmers to adopt identical practices, but to strengthen their ability to experiment, adapt and innovate in response to their own circumstances. In this sense, what scales is not necessarily a particular innovation but a culture of inquiry and collective problem-solving.

Key lessons for practice

Across the discussions, several practical lessons emerged:

- Start with farmers' questions.
- Match participation to the nature of the research.
- Treat research as a learning process.
- Build trust and long-term relationships.
- Strengthen farmers' organisations as coordinators and brokers.
- Build communities of learning.
- Use evidence for both innovation and advocacy.
- Scale capacities and learning rather than simply replicating technologies.

Together, these lessons demonstrate that farmer-led research is not a single methodology but a way of organizing innovation around farmers' priorities.



6. What must change in policies, institutions and funding systems

Scaling farmer-led research and co-innovation cannot depend solely on the commitment of individual researchers, farmers or farmers' organisations. While local initiatives can demonstrate what is possible, lasting change at scale requires supportive institutions, funding mechanisms and policy frameworks. The question is therefore how agricultural research and innovation systems can be organized so that farmer-led approaches become common rather than exceptional.

Redefining what success looks like

Current research systems measure success using indicators that are poorly aligned with the objectives of farmer-led research. Universities and research institutions are typically rewarded on publications, citations, patents, grants secured and postgraduate degrees completed. While these outputs remain important for the advancement of science and emergence of new technologies and innovations, farmer-led research places greater emphasis on outcomes that matter directly to farmers:

- relevance to farmers' priorities;
- adoption and adaptation of innovations;
- strengthened farmer capacities;
- empowerment and agency;
- resilience and sustainability;
- improvements in livelihoods.



If such outcomes are not measured, they risk being ignored. A research evaluation system should recognize things such as community engagement, facilitation, co-learning and long-term impact alongside conventional scientific outputs. The challenge is not to replace scientific excellence with social relevance, but to recognize that both are necessary.

Farmer-led approaches require investing time in relationship-building, facilitation, trust creation and iterative learning. Yet, academic systems often reward speed, specialization and individual achievement. This tension begins with researcher training. Future researchers need not only specialized technical expertise. In curricula, a greater emphasis should be placed on transdisciplinary approaches and co-creation methodologies.

At the same time, institutional incentive structures need to evolve. Researchers should be recognized and rewarded for building partnerships, supporting innovation processes and contributing to real-world change, not mainly for publishing scientific papers. Without such reforms, farmer-led research risks remaining dependent on exceptional individuals rather than becoming embedded within research systems.

Investing in farmers' organisations as innovation actors

A recurring theme across discussions was the strategic role of farmers' organisations within agricultural innovation systems. The FORI experience demonstrates that they can also play a central role in research and innovation.

Recognizing these functions has important implications for policy and funding. Farmers' organisations should be treated not merely as stakeholders in research systems but as co-research and innovation actors in their own right. This includes providing better access to research funding and support for further research facilitation capacity development. A practical lesson emerging from the FORI programme is that when farmers' organisations coordinate research initiatives and manage related financial resources, accountability shifts closer to farmers.

Public institutions and long-term sustainability

Farmer-led research projects often generate promising results, but sustaining and scaling these outcomes requires broader institutional support. Farmer-led research needs to map relevant stakeholders early in the process and involve them throughout increasing the likelihood that successful innovations influence policies, extension programmes, investment plans and public budgets.

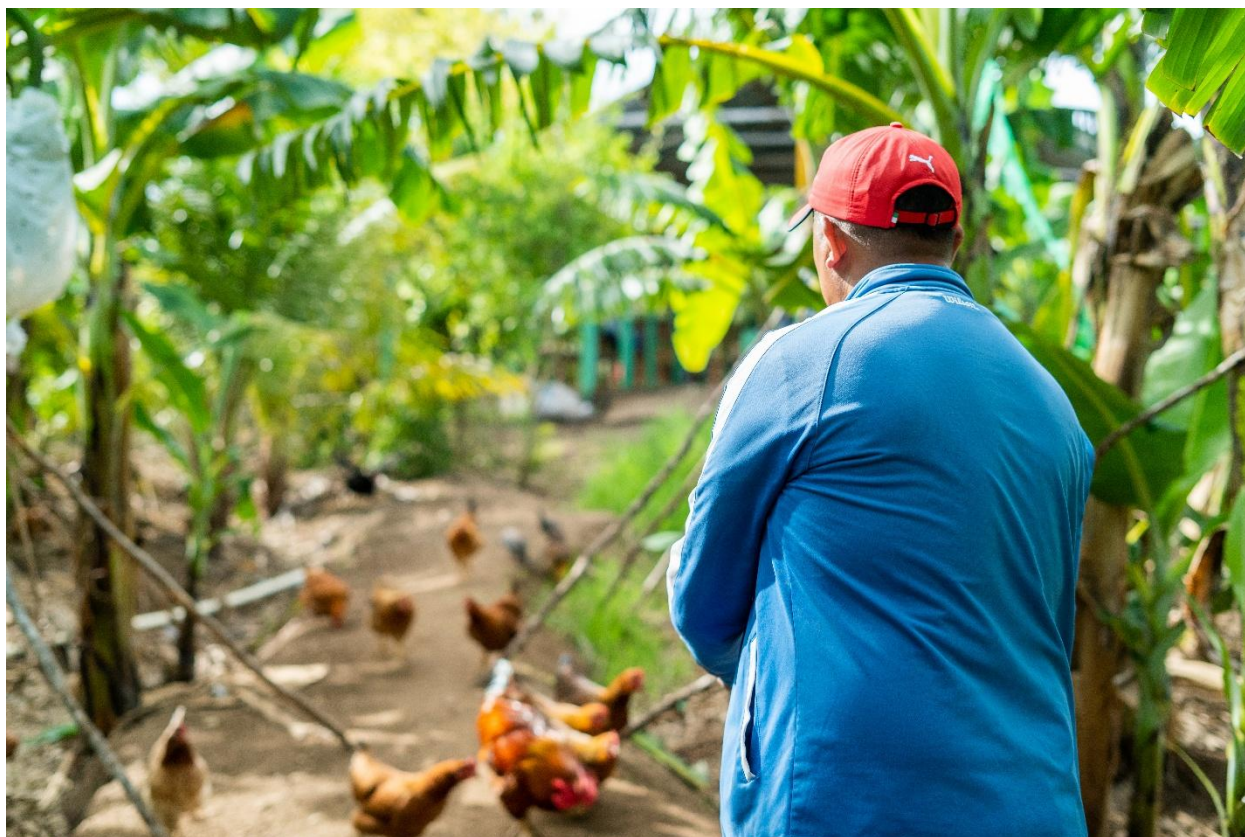
The speakers highlighted the importance of the connection between research and policy. Research should not be viewed merely as a tool for generating technologies or technical recommendations. It should generate relevant evidence that informs public decision-making and helps ensure that agricultural policies reflect farmers' realities. This is particularly important in the context of agroecological transitions, where policymakers often face competing narratives and limited evidence regarding viable pathways. Farmer-led research provides a mechanism through which farmers' experiences can be systematically documented, analysed and brought into policy discussions. In this sense, farmer-led research contributes not only to innovation but also to democratic participation in agricultural governance.

Intellectual property, knowledge governance and farmers' rights

A recurring but less extensively discussed theme concerned the governance of knowledge, including intellectual property rights and farmers' rights over seeds, innovations and traditional knowledge systems. While farmer-led research focuses primarily on how knowledge is co-created, participants highlighted that questions of ownership and control become increasingly important once knowledge moves beyond local experimentation into wider research, dissemination and policy systems.

Two perspectives emerged from the discussions. On one hand, some participants argued that knowledge generated through publicly funded research should remain openly accessible and not be enclosed through restrictive intellectual property regimes. From this perspective, excessive protection of innovations risks limiting farmers' ability to share, adapt and build upon knowledge collectively. One farmer participant stressed that much of what is protected "should not be," and suggested that standardized agreements could help ensure that shared knowledge remains in the public domain.

On the other hand, some participants pointed to the need for stronger recognition and protection of farmers' own knowledge systems and innovations, particularly in contexts where genetic resources and traditional practices are increasingly documented, formalized or commercialized without adequate attribution or benefit-sharing. In this view, the risk is not only restriction of knowledge, but also its appropriation without recognition.



These perspectives highlight a central tension: farmer-led research seeks to promote open, collaborative knowledge creation, yet operates within broader systems where knowledge is often treated as a commodity. This challenge is of course not unique to farmer-led research. As Dr. Abay noted, genetic resources and agricultural knowledge circulate widely and are difficult to contain within institutional boundaries. A constructive response could be to ensure proper documentation and recognition of farmers' knowledge, providing governments and institutions with a database to defend farmers' rights where necessary.

Taken together, the discussions suggest that farmer-led research must be understood within a broader knowledge governance landscape. Strengthening farmers' intellectual property rights is therefore not separate from promoting farmer-led research. Finding fair solutions to the challenges is part of an enabling environment in which farmers can safely contribute to, benefit from and shape innovation processes. Ultimately, the challenge is to balance openness, collaboration and innovation with fairness, recognition and protection of farmers' contributions to agricultural knowledge systems.

Towards more democratic innovation systems

The themes emerging from the webinar series resonate strongly with evolving continental policy frameworks. The African Union's Agenda 2063 envisions "The Africa We Want" as one built on inclusive, sustainable and people-driven development. Its emphasis on citizen participation and locally owned development processes aligns closely with the principles underlying farmer-led research. Within the agricultural sector, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) provides the principal framework for agricultural transformation. The adoption of the Kampala Declaration and the renewed CAADP Strategy and Action Plan (2026–2035) offers several important points of convergence with the discussions emerging from the FORI programme. The framework emphasizes inclusive participation, multi-stakeholder engagement and accountability. These principles mirror the webinars' participants' call for more equitable research partnerships and stronger farmer participation in agenda-setting and decision-making.

CAADP stresses evidence-based policymaking and the integration of agricultural priorities into national investment plans. This creates important opportunities for farmer-generated evidence to inform public policies and investment decisions. Finally, the longstanding commitment by African governments to allocate at least 10 percent of public expenditure to agriculture remains an important advocacy lever.

Some of the webinars' speakers noted that if governments are serious about building resilient and sustainable agrifood systems, investment in farmer-led research and innovation should form part of that commitment. Farmer-led research is not simply about improving individual projects or making research more participatory. It is about creating innovation systems that are more responsive, inclusive and accountable. The challenge is therefore not to replace one source of expertise with another. It is to create institutions and processes capable of bringing different forms of knowledge together on more equal terms.

The experiences shared throughout the webinar series suggest that farmer-led research is moving from the margins. Yet, existing funding models, incentive structures and governance arrangements still tend to favour conventional research and innovation approaches.

The opportunity, however, is considerable. By strengthening farmers' and farmers' organisations' role in defining research agendas, generating evidence and shaping innovation pathways, agricultural research systems can become more relevant, more equitable and ultimately more effective in addressing the complex challenges facing food systems today.

Acknowledgements

SACAU and AgriCord sincerely thank all contributors and participants of the three-part webinar series for their time, efforts and insights. We believe that farmers' organisations around the world are a driving force for more equitable, just and sustainable food systems and that dialogue and learning form the backbone for successful cooperation and partnerships between all actors of the ecosystem – farmers and their organisations, researchers and their institutes, policy makers, public authorities, financial institutions, private service providers and development partners.

AgriCord and all implementing organisations, including SACAU, thank the European Union and the Organisation for African, Caribbean and Pacific States for their support of the FORI programme.



Annex: Webinar Contributions

This document is based on the recordings and transcriptions of a three-part webinar series co-organised by the Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions (SACAU) and AgriCord in the context of the EU and OACPS-funded FORI programme in 2025. All opinions expressed are those of the contributors, authors and editors. These opinions do not reflect official positions of the donor institutions.

Webinar 1: Putting Farmers in the Lead - Unpacking Farmer-Led Research for Agroecological Transformation		
Moderation	<u>Dr. Eveline Sawadogo Compaoré</u> <i>Institute for Environment and Agricultural Research (INERA)</i>	
Keynote	<u>Stuart Oates</u> <i>Farmer and Scholar</i>	A practitioner's view from the farm (Cornwall, UK) <i>Funding mechanisms, role of science, scale and environment, working with nature</i>
Keynote	<u>Dr. Fetien Abera</u> <i>South Carolina State University</i>	Distinguishing concepts, and a breeder's personal transformation (Ethiopia) <i>Concepts: Farmer-led research, farmer-centric research, action research/participatory research, participatory technology development, farmer-field schools, living labs</i> <i>Indigenous knowledge, researcher blind spot</i>
Discussion	Intellectual property and farmers' rights; gender inclusion and women as co-owners of research; building trust between researchers and farmers; access to funding, insurance and compliance	

Webinar 2: Competencies and Capacities in Farmer-Led Research on Agroecology		
Moderation	<u>Dr. Hlami Ngwenya</u> <i>University of the Free State (South Africa)</i>	
Keynote	<u>Katja Vuori</u> <i>AgriCord</i>	Key take-aways from the implementers of the FORI programme <i>Unlearning; ownership and co-creation; soft-skills, adaptability and mindset; project management, participatory research skills; conflict and mediation, evidence-based advocacy; embedding and scaling</i>
Panel	<u>Damian Sulumo</u> <i>MVIWAARUSHA</i>	A farmer-researcher network model (Tanzania) <i>How MVIWAARUSHA organises local networks, each with a trained farmer-researcher who runs an agroecological research trial</i>
	<u>Dr. Patrice Ndimanya</u> <i>University of Burundi</i>	From expert to partner (Burundi) <i>On the need for a shift from researcher-as-expert to researcher-as-partner, about overcoming resistance to change</i>
	<u>Dr. Sarah Larsen</u>	A culture of curiosity and tiered entry points (Canada)

	<i>Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO)</i>	<i>How the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario nurtures a culture of curiosity and advances scientific literacy among farmers</i>
Discussion	Authority in agenda setting; farmer-led vs farmers' organisation-led; integrating farmer-led research with conventional research; entry points and limits of participation; youth and value chains	

Webinar 3: Partnerships and Power Dynamics in Farmer-Led Research: Towards Fair and Equitable Co-Creation		
Moderation	<u>Dr. Eveline Sawadogo Compaoré</u> <i>Institute for Environment and Agricultural Research (INERA)</i>	
Keynote	<u>Dr. Cargele Masso</u> <i>International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)</i>	Power Dynamics in Conventional vs. Farmer-Led Research Approaches for Fair Co-Creation <i>Understanding research ecosystems; building relationships; resource allocation; transformation processes</i>
Panel	<u>Elizabeth Atangana</u> <i>CNOPCAM</i>	The perspective of farmers’ organisations <i>Value of farmer knowledge; on role of accompanying researchers; integration of agroecology into mandates</i>
	Alessandro Meschinelli <i>IFAD</i>	The perspective of researchers <i>On the need for a shift from researcher-as-expert to researcher-as-partner, about overcoming resistance to change</i>
	<u>Dr. Birgit Habermann</u> <i>International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)</i>	The perspective of researchers <i>Mindset shift; soft skills required; living labs; positive deviance</i>
	<u>Leah Gichuki</u> <i>International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)</i>	
Discussion	Involvement of authorities/state institutions in agroecology research processes; key performance indicators for research initiatives; incentives for academia to endorse participatory / farmer-led research; scientific validation of farmers’ knowledge; partnership principles	



© SACAU & AgriCord (2026)

RESEARCH, DIFFERENTLY

Rebalancing knowledge and power in agroecological innovation

Insights from the SACAU–AgriCord webinar series

Version 1

September 2026

Conceptualised and curated by

Katja VUORI, Ishmael SUNGA, Martin AGBOTON, Tlotlisang NKHASE

Editing and layout by Victor ROOSEN, Lukas HADASCH