



Management response to the Mid-Term Review of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) and the Young Professionals for Agricultural Development (YPARD) network (Project Reference 7F-106990.04)

Management Response

The Management Response (MR) states the position of the SDC on the recommendations of the GFRAS/YPARD mid-term review (MTR). The MR provides a solid basis for strategic decision-making and is a core element for the re-evaluation and likely termination of the GFRAS/YPARD support after the end of the present phase.

Assessment of the mid-term review

The mid-term review was conducted by the School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences (HAFL) of the Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH)", who mobilized a team of two in-house consultants and two regional consultants, with a specific focus of Africa and Latin America, respectively. The mid-term review specifically focussed on the implementation of the Joint Operational Plan (JOP) of GFRAS and YPARD, assessing its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. The review combined qualitative and quantitative methods to address performance and draw conclusions. Over 60 interviews with a large variety of stakeholders have been conducted and 40 people responded to online surveys.

The main objectives of the MTR were 1) to evaluate the implementation of the GFRAS/YPARD Joint Operational Plan according to the DAC/OECD criteria (coherence, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability) against the planned and agreed objectives and outputs; 2) to evaluate GFRAS/YPARDs present institutional, organizational and financial sustainability, as well as its development potential and options; 3) to recommend to SDC and GFRAS/YPARD how both organisations can strengthen their mandate, outreach and impact, their organisational set-up and their financial sustainability.

The MTR addressed the objective 1 through the lens of a SWOT analysis, which provided very valuable insights on a general level, but with some limitations in the evidence-based assessment of the DAC criteria on effectiveness or impact. The main focus, and also the strength of the MTR was in the forward-looking assessment of how both organisations can strengthen their financial sustainability, their organisational set-up and sharpen their mandate (objectives 2 and 2). In this regard, the MTR report and recommendations went even beyond the ToRs, and provided very valuable ideas and recommendations how GFRAS and YPARD can strengthen their business case.

SDC appreciates the comprehensiveness of the review report and the focus on organizational and structural improvements, on institutional and financial sustainability and strengthening of impact generation. Our own assessment on the present effectiveness of GFRAS and YPARD is somewhat more nuanced than what is described in the report, and in the case of GFRAS we don't see strong evidence that it has been very effective on the policy level to advocate for the strengthening of Rural Advisory Services.

Main findings

The evaluation has confirmed the relevance and the effectiveness of both GFRAS and YPARD, and both organisations have achieved significant progress in either promoting Rural Advisory Services and empowering young professionals to lead the agricultural transformation, respectively. While the overall assessment is positive, the report specifically mentioned that GFRAS has missed an opportunity to play a leading role in the digitalisation of Rural Advisory Services and its own limited digital presence reduces its visibility and hampers stakeholder engagement. For YPARD, the report identifies a huge and so far untapped potential to scale successful youth-led agricultural initiatives, by better harnessing its reach of over 32'000 members across the world.

The report is highlighting important structural challenges due to the informal nature of both networks, which work to a large extent on a voluntary basis. A more formalized nature and professionalization of roles, particularly in YPARD, could strengthen their effectiveness and sustainability.

The merger between GFRAS and YPARD that was operationalized through the Joint Operational Plan 2021-2025 did not yield the anticipated efficiency gains but rather led to some frictions and a dilution of the respective mandates. It is therefore suggested to loosen the partnership, develop separate operational frameworks and plans and just cooperate on a needs and opportunistic basis. This is at the same time an opportunity for both organisations to strengthen their value proposition and to develop and implement state-of-the-art monitoring and evaluation systems that allow better to track progress of GFRAS and YPARD initiatives.

Both organizations face funding challenges that will be further deepened in case SDC will stop funding them in the future. The broadening of the funding basis is of paramount importance, coupled with the adoption of business models that can generate some additional income through fees, consultancies and remuneration for specific services.

Out of the five main recommendations, three recommendations are 'fully agreed' (green), and two recommendations are 'partially agreed' (orange)– see table below. In light of future budget constraints and the increased focus of the merged Health and Food Section on nutrition and agroecology we no longer consider core support to GFRAS as an essential contribution to our programmatic framework. At the same time, the mandate of YPARD remains very relevant for our ambition to strengthen youth in food systems. The planned separation of the two networks offers additional flexibility for SDC to decide individually about any future engagement with both networks.

Main recommendations

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>Clearer separation between GFRAS and YPARD, no joint operational plan</i>
The JOP was conceived to align the efforts of the two networks towards a common goal, while enhancing synergy and collaboration. In reality, the operationalization of the plan has proven difficult, and due to differing priorities, operational approaches and organizational cultures has led to significant friction. There is growing consensus that the networks might be better off functioning independently, allowing each to focus on its distinct strengths and missions. | |
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2.	<i>Organizational Governance and structural improvements</i> To address the governance and sustainability challenges faced by GFRAS and YPARD, a strategic transition from a volunteer-based model to a professional network model is recommended. This shift will enhance operational effectiveness, reduce volunteer fatigue and ensure that both networks are equipped to meet the growing complexity of agricultural development goals.	
3.	<i>Enhancing institutional and financial sustainability</i> Based on the value propositions, GFRAS and YPARD ever more need to diversify their funding to achieve long-term sustainability. Relying solely on donor funding is no longer viable in today's fast changing global landscape of development cooperation. Both organisations should explore hybrid business models. The following models should be explored, and a fit-for purpose combination of models be implemented by the two organisations: - Membership based model with membership fees - Service provision and consultancy model - Platform and resource hub model with content subscriptions - Collaborative research and innovation partnership model - Donor funded model	
4.	<i>Strengthening and leveraging impact</i> To maintain relevance and accountability, GFRAS and YPARD will need to continuously strengthen their impact. This requires a systematic approach to measuring outcomes and ensuring their initiatives are effectively addressing community needs. M&E frameworks are important to enhance the integration of digital technologies. Digital-driven analytics (such as data visualization platforms) would provide insights into project performance, enabling the networks to make data-driven adjustments quickly and make it easier for stakeholders to track progress.	
5.	<i>SDC's future engagement</i> GFRAS, with its focus on strengthening agricultural extension systems, and YPARD, with its work in engaging young professionals, are key assets in promoting innovation, knowledge transfer and the inclusion of young voices in decision-making processes. Supporting them would reinforce SDCs broader mission of strengthening global development initiatives in regions where RAS and youth involvement are key to transformative change. To ensure their sustainability, SDC should encourage the networks to diversify their funding sources. In light of financial limitations, SDC could consider offering phased or conditional support to both networks. This could include providing funds for specific key activities. SDC's support should also include the development of a right-sized functional M&E framework, which will make both networks better positioned to attract additional funding.	
Fully agree		Partially agree
		Disagree

Overview of recommendations, management response and measures

Recommendation 1
<i>Clearer separation between GFRAS and YPARD, no joint operational plan</i> The JOP was conceived to align the efforts of the two networks towards a common goal, while enhancing synergy and collaboration. In reality, the operationalization of the joint plan has proven difficult, and due to differing priorities, operational approaches and organizational cultures has led to significant friction. There is growing consensus that the networks might be better off functioning independently, allowing each to focus on its distinct strengths and missions.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
We fully agree with this recommendation, and we have intentionally brought this question up and included its analysis in the terms of reference of the mid-term review. At the same time, we have to admit that the formulation of a joint operational plan 2021-2025 between GFRAS and YPARD has previously been suggested particularly by SDC. This was driven by the expectation to create synergies and also to reduce the administrative burden of SDC, as both organisations are hosted by AGRIDEA, which allowed to cover them in one contract. Despite the good intentions it turned out that this “forced marriage” between the two institutions did not really work and was in fact rather counterproductive by diluting their mandates without creating added value. It is also important to mention that both GFRAS and YPARD completely agree with this recommendation and wish to become again fully independent. In the future they would just cooperate on a pragmatic and issue-based basis where their mandates fully overlap, e.g. in promoting youth in rural advisory services. This separation between GFRAS and YPARD will also allow SDC to decide independently, in case we would like to support one organisation, but not the other.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Both organizations are now separately in the process to develop their operational plans from 2026 onwards	GFRAS and YPARD, SDC will provide inputs to the processes.	End 2025

Recommendation 2		
<i>Organizational Governance and structural improvements</i> To address the governance and sustainability challenges faced by GFRAS and YPARD, a strategic transition from a volunteer-based model to a professional network model is recommended. This shift will enhance operational effectiveness, reduce volunteer fatigue and ensure that both networks are equipped to meet the growing complexity of agricultural development goals.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
We agree that current volunteer-driven coordination mechanisms struggle to deliver the level of responsiveness and adaptability required. Transitioning to a professional model (professionalizing key roles) would not only reduce the burden of volunteers but also enable GFRAS and YPARD to attract and retain high-caliber talent dedicated to advancing the network’s missions. However, specifically in the case of YPARD, a professionalization of roles might fundamentally modify and challenge the way it works, as a grassroots organization that is mainly based on a very high intrinsic motivation of the people on the ground. When considering Recommendation 2 we must factor in that any further professionalization comes with costs that would have to compensate for the now free volunteering work. Recommendation 2 must therefore be looked at together with recommendation 3 on financial sustainability.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Review of governance and financial models of both GFRAS and YPARD during the process of developing their new strategy and operational plans	GFRAS and YPARD	By end of 2025

Recommendation 3

<i>Enhancing institutional and financial sustainability</i> Based on the value propositions, GFRAS and YPARD ever more need to diversify their funding to achieve long-term sustainability. Relying solely on donor funding is no longer viable in today's fast changing global landscape of development cooperation. Both organisations should explore hybrid business models. The following models should be explored, and a fit-for purpose combination of models be implemented by the two organisations: - Membership based model with membership fees - Service provision and consultancy model - Platform and resource hub model with content subscriptions - Collaborative research and innovation partnership model - Donor funded model		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
We fully agree that both GFRAS and YPARD must diversify their funding strategies. Both have attracted project funding (GFRAS quite significantly and YPARD moderately), but their secretariats are heavily dependant on SDC core funding. All five business models suggested by the reviewers entail some interesting elements that should be reviewed in detail by both organisations. We have some reservations with regard to the membership fee model, which at least for YPARD could disincentivize disadvantaged youth to participate in YPARD, while at the same time generate limited income that might not be worth the effort to incur it. The service provision model might offer opportunities specifically for GFRAS, e.g. through a service fee for their learning materials, while the resource hub model could be interesting for YPARD in rendering specific services for donors or multi-lateral organisations. The collaborative research and innovation partnership model could be conducive for both organisations and they should in particular also reach out to CGIAR to explore collaborations.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) We have communicated to both GFRAS and YPARD that they should prioritize exploring new funding models in 2025. Given that HAFL has already come up with a list of options, we have suggested that they could further engage with HAFL as their business model consultant/moderator. We will not put any additional funding in this process, but we have indicated flexibility in case some of our core funding would be used for such a process.	GFRAS and YPARD	By end of 2025

Recommendation 4		
<i>Strengthening and leveraging impact</i> To maintain relevance and accountability, GFRAS and YPARD will need to continuously strengthen their impact. This requires a systematic approach to measuring outcomes and ensuring their initiatives are effectively addressing community needs. M&E frameworks are important to enhance the integration of digital technologies. Digital-driven analytics (such as data visualization platforms) would provide insights into project performance, enabling the networks to make data-driven adjustments quickly and make it easier for stakeholders to track progress.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
We fully agree with the recommendation. The existing results framework of the operational plan is not very helpful in monitoring and understanding the contribution of GFRAS		

and YPARD to the defined outcomes. The existing M&E framework entails mainly quantitative indicators (e.g funds raised, number of partners, number of country fora, etc) that without more context information are not giving real insights into dynamics and achievements. This information is amended in the narrative part of the operational reports, but goes only to SDC and is not publicly available. A more transparent and public communication of GFRAS and YPARD's activities and results would be very desirable and could help both organisations in fundraising. Whether this should be in the form of a data visualization platform remains to be seen, it sounds a bit resource intensive to us. But the minimum could be good annual infographics on achievements.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) SDC will communicate to both GFRAS and YPARD that and improvement of their M&E system should be part of their new strategies beyond 2025	GFRAS and YPARD, with inputs from SDC	By end of 2026

Recommendation 5

SDC's future engagement
GFRAS, with its focus on strengthening agricultural extension systems, and YPARD, with its work in engaging young professionals, are key assets in promoting innovation, knowledge transfer and the inclusion of young voices in decision-making processes. Supporting them would reinforce SDCs broader mission of strengthening global development initiatives in regions where RAS and youth involvement are key to transformative change. To ensure their sustainability, SDC should encourage the networks to diversify their funding sources. In light of financial limitations, SDC could consider offering phased or conditional support to both networks. This could include providing funds for specific key activities. SDC's support should also include the development of a right-sized functional M&E framework, which will make both networks better positioned to attract additional funding

Management response

Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
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We partially agree with the recommendations. For us, they point too much into the direction that SDC should continue as an important core funder of both networks. We agree that SDC should encourage the networks to broaden and diversify their funding basis, this is also very consistent with the messages that SDC has given to both organisations during the last years. But the pressure on GFRAS to broaden their funding basis also came with a cost: GFRAS was successful in acquiring new projects but the ensuing implementation of this projects came at the expense of moving from policy work to operational work, with a quite significant neglect of global policy dialogue by GFRAS. We agree with the recommendation that SDC might offer in the future more conditional support. For GFRAS we will most likely move completely away from core funding after the present contract has expired (end 2026) and we will decide on an opportunistic basis if their current work on promotion of agroecology in rural extension services can create strong synergies with our programmatic work on agroecology in the future. The mandate of YPARD continues to resonate well with our programmatic focus on strengthening youth in food systems and a continuation of core funding, or mix of core and project funding will have to be evaluated after the end of the existing contract.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
b) Communication to GFRAS that core funding will end by end of 2026. Dialogue with YPARD on potential future of SDC core or earmarked support.	SDC	GFRAS: Mid 2026 YPARD: Mid 2026

KAM, 11. April 2025

