

Some notes of the World Rural Forum's 6th Global Conference on Family Farming

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The 6th Global Conference on Family Farming hosted by the World Rural Forum (WRF) on 27–28 March 2019 in Bilbao, Basque Country, Spain, was in essence a celebration that the WRF and the World Coordinating Committee (WCC) for the IYFF (International Year of Family Farming 2014) + 10 had managed to get the United Nations Decade of Family Farming (UNDF) proclaimed for the period 2019–28. The conference was supposed to be an event preparing for the official launch of the UNDF in late May, focusing on the action plan for the UNDF. As the International Support Group (ISG) for an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) has an observer seat in the WCC, I attended the conference, with funding support from CELEP (Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism).

Days 1 and 2 (25 and 26 March) were for conference preparatory meetings of farmers, women and youth. Days 3 and 4 (27 and 28 March) were for the conference proper. In the original programme, the meeting of the WCC was to be on Thursday afternoon, 28 March. WRF informed me that I should arrive in Bilbao on 26 March in the evening and leave on 29 March. I booked an inexpensive flight and an inexpensive train ticket (tied to a particular train). Shortly before the conference, WRF rescheduled the WCC meeting to Tuesday 26 March. Buying new tickets was prohibitively expensive for CELEP, so I did not join the WCC meeting, which was over by the time I arrived.

The conference participants were told that the people who had been present in Bilbao on 25 and 26 March had made tremendous progress in developing the action plan for the UNDF.

The conference consisted mainly of presentations by people from WRF (World Rural Forum), FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), AFA (Asian Farmers Association), COPROFAM (Federation of Family Farmers in South America), AU (African Union), CFS (Committee on World Food Security), EU (European Union) and the Spanish and Basque Governments. The speeches were all celebrating family farmers but not going into depth about issues of family farmers, and they all tended to be fairly repetitive. Pastoralists were mentioned twice in passing by Esther Penunia from AFA.

I managed to get in the first question after the presentations and asked how pastoralists would be included in the UNDF. Esther responded that pastoralists form a subsection of AFA and are seeking representation in policymaking processes and that the WCC is prepared to recognise a global pastoralist organisation. Another participant, Cristina Grandi from IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements), followed with the second question, asking what policies should be promoted for pastoralists, bringing the example of shepherds in Italy who last month dumped sheep and goat milk because of the low prices they are receiving. However, there was no response to this from the speakers and there was no room for debating such questions during the conference.

A further comment from the audience came from the chair of the National Committee for Family Farming in Chad, who stated that a large proportion of producers in his country are pastoralists, yet generally pastoralists are not seen as family farmers. Another participant from Africa mentioned the recent killings of Peul in Mali and raised the issue of security for pastoral producers. During the coffee and lunch breaks, some participants mentioned that pastoralists are often involved in ethnic and land conflicts with family farmers, and these participants doubted whether most pastoralists would identify themselves as family farmers. This is an issue that we in the ISG for the IYRP should explore with our partners before we get further engaged in the UNDF.

In the next round of speeches, Mario Arvelo, the President of CFS, explicitly mentioned pastoralists as a subgroup of family farmers. They are represented in the Civil Society Mechanism for the CFS. In contrast, Josefa Sacko, AU Commissioner for Rural Economy and Agriculture, brought a long list of vulnerable people among family farmers, but did not mention pastoralists.

We spent about 4 hours on Wednesday afternoon in small groups commenting on the UNDF Action Plan. I joined the East Africa group (there were only participants from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, not from other Eastern African countries). The groups were strictly facilitated to answer specific questions about the action plan. This consisted of tables in poor English; a lot of the discussion time was spent on trying to understand what was meant. A person from Kenya and I inserted some words about livestock and pastoralists, but that was as much as we could contribute in this direction.

The feedback to the plenary the following morning from the East African group (interestingly, presented by a young Ugandan who did not take part in the group discussion) highlighted the need to regard pastoralists, fishers and hunter-gatherers as family farmers. Dolores Tombo, a women's leader with PROPAC (Plateforme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d'Afrique Centrale) also raised this point, whereas the representative from West Africa referred to the importance of agrosylvopastoral producers. The speakers from the other regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America did not refer to pastoralists.

As no mention had been made by any of the speakers about the Action Networks (ANs) that FAO and IFAD had listed in their guiding document as one of the mechanisms to support the implementation of the UNDF, I took advantage of a brief question period after the feedback session to ask Torben Nilsson, Senior Global Engagement Specialist in IFAD and member of the UNDF International Steering Committee (ISC), if ANs were still foreseen. He said he would regard ANs as partners of the ISC; they would consist of groups of persons and institutions that want to form a dedicated AN on a particular topic. The ISC has not decided on specific topics for the ANs. The initiative would have to come from the people and institutions that want to focus on a topic. However, from WRF staff, I had heard that ANs would take a similar form as in the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–25); i.e. an AN would have to be established at the request of one or more countries, which would define the objectives, scope and initial programme of work, identify other partner countries, convene meetings and manage joint initiatives; and it would operate under the leadership of a government institution.

In the closing session, the women who spoke on behalf of the World Farmers Organization (Arianna Giuliadori) and Via Campesina (Joan Brady) both mentioned the importance of including pastoralists.

All in all, the conference remained very much on the surface, with repeated generalities on family farming. The most that could be achieved was insertion of the occasional reference to "pastoralists" but there was little room for explanation or discussion about what issues or policies related to pastoralism (or indeed to family farmers) would be raised during the Decade.

Perhaps the UNDF ISC will accept some of the suggestions to include the words "livestock" and "pastoralists" in the action plan, but I am not sure what difference this will make. The only way I see to be able to draw more attention to the achievements and issues of pastoralists during the Decade would be to form a UNDF Action Network on pastoralism. We should try to obtain more information about how to go about this, only if there is agreement in the IYRP ISG that we want to pursue this path. There are obviously differing ideas about how ANs are to be formed. I suspect that the UNDF ISC has not yet really discussed this issue.

The official launching of the UNDF will take place in Rome on 27–29 May. If Fiona Flintan is already in Rome by then, perhaps she could attend and could follow up on the issue of an AN on pastoralism, if deemed to be of interest.

I had only 20 copies of the English 4-pager on pastoralists as family farmers, 20 of the French version and 20 of the brief on pastoralism and SDGs. They had all disappeared from the display area by the end of the first day of the conference. A couple of people expressed interest in a Spanish translation, which I will send to them.