



## ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2019 – A Members’ Retreat

19-21 June | Zurich-Maennedorf, Switzerland

### INTRODUCTION

After many years of thematically focused Annual General Assemblies (AGA), the [2019 AGA](#) was conceptualised as an inward-focused Members’ Retreat, intended to inspire members to reflect on and leverage their unique strengths in the rural development space, in particular in light of a thoroughly changing environment. The retreat was hosted by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC).

The two day event brought together more than 40 Platform members and partners with an action learning mind-set and a focus on examining and redefining the Platform’s purpose that can guide a new modus operandi. The facilitation was in the hands of Nancy White, the Platform’s long-term moderator.

The agenda was comprised of a series of group and individual exercises and offered many opportunities for bilateral and group conversations centred around four major questions:

1. What should the Platform accomplish of high value in the coming years?
2. What is the Platform’s unique focus and value?
3. How should the Platform evolve?
4. What are the next steps?

These questions were posed with the aim of reaching a consensus on the desired, essential value of the Platform going forward, informing the next strategic planning process; and offering recommendations for the Board.

Two background documents had been prepared by the Secretariat and made accessible to all participants prior to the Retreat: 1), [a background paper on thematic multi-stakeholder networks](#), commissioned by the Secretariat and compiled by a research group from Utrecht University, and 2), the results of a Member Feedback exercise in 2019, which reflects members’ views on the functionality and purpose of the Platform.

#### For further reference:

[AGA 2019 - Agenda Overview](#)

[AGA 2019 – Concept Note](#)

[GDPRD Member Feedback 2019 - Results](#)

[Background Paper on Thematic Multi-Stakeholder Networks](#)

## SUMMARY OF THE DEBATES

### Day 1, Thursday, 20 June & Day 2, Friday, 21 June

The Annual General Assembly started with welcome addresses by Ueli Mauderli (SDC) and the Platform's Co-Chairs, David Hegwood (USAID) and Patrick Herlant (EC). The Co-Chairs highlighted the immediate challenges as well as the range of decisions to be taken to sustain the activities and partnerships both in the short and in the long run.

The challenges to the Platform are manifold, as the Co-Chairs expressed. In particular, the new paradigm under the Agenda 2030 considerably changes the roles of donor agencies and international financing institutions and impacts the shape of programmes and policy priorities. The Platform needs to adapt to these challenges. Further Platform development will have to be defined by the 2030 Agenda and react to a changing budget reality, as the current modus operandi with the majority of funding coming from BMZ and the EC is not balanced or sustainable.

Given the end of the Platform's current BMZ project commission on 31 December 2019, the need to find a new Platform host and to organise this transition period is a top priority. Any new format will have to provide answers to the following questions:

- How do we work together?
- Will the "new" Platform have the same function(ality) or not?
- Who should participate?
- Is the concept of a "donor platform" still valid or a relic of old thinking?

Participants agreed that defining the future of the Platform is key, and regardless in which direction the Platform goes, careful planning and decision making must be taken over the course of the next six months.

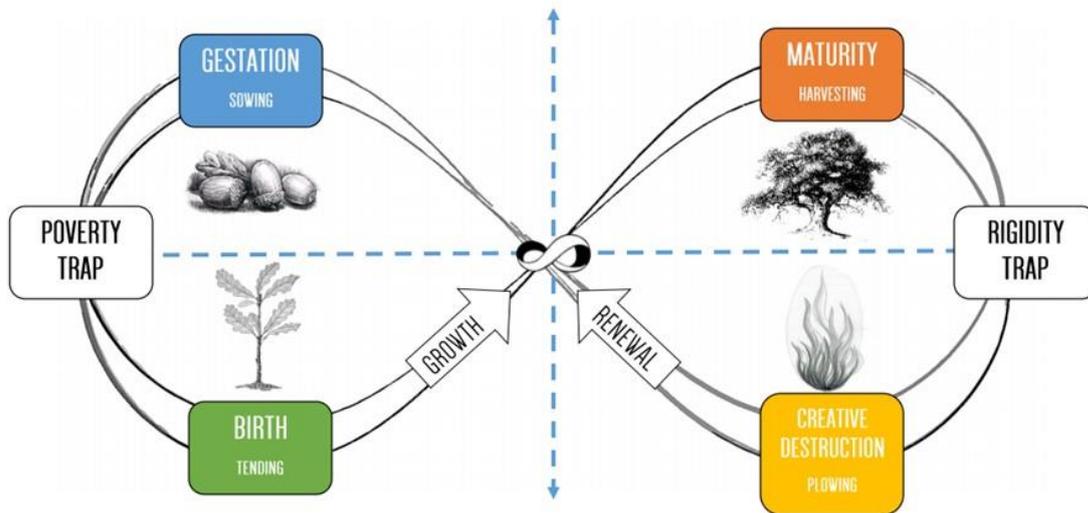
In the subsequent exercises and discussions, Nancy led the participants on a journey of introspection and reflection, visually supported and framed by the Ecocycle<sup>1</sup> concept. This concept is structured along six main areas of strategic planning:

1. **Purpose** - What is the fundamental justification of the Platform?
2. **Context** - What is happening around us that demands change?
3. **Challenges** - What are the challenges we face in order to make progress?
4. **Baseline** - What are the Platform's current strengths that are valued by its members?
5. **Ambition**
6. **Action & Evaluation.**

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<sup>1</sup> A tool that enables the analysis of a group's full portfolio of activities and relationships to identify obstacles (rigidity trap) and opportunities (poverty trap).

# ECOCYCLE PLANNING



Liberating Structures: Ecocycle Planning  
Co-developed by Keith McCandless + Henri Lipmanowicz ([www.liberatingstructures.com](http://www.liberatingstructures.com))  
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The following sections summarize major points of the discussion, in the agenda sequence:

## 1. PURPOSE

**“What is the fundamental justification of the Platform? “**

Participants were confronted with a key question: “If the Platform were to vanish overnight, what one thing would you bring back?” Participants rapidly shared challenges and expectations in pairs and built new connections. Next, participants debated the ideal fundamental purpose of the Platform by phrasing a nine word statement.

There was consensus that the Platform must be useful and attractive for members. It must create an open and trusted environment to enable shared learnings and common understandings. **The purpose statements encompassed five key directions: foresight, influence, coordination, collaboration and sharing/exchanging (Table 1).** They were confirmed by participants as the key five functions of the Platform.

**Table 1. List of purpose statements developed by breakout groups**

PURPOSE	
Create an open and trusted environment to enable shared learnings and common understandings	Sharing/exchanging
Exchange knowledge and practices to improve results towards thriving rural areas	Sharing/exchanging
Provide strategic thought leadership for ODA investment in ARD	Foresight
Support the identification of fundamental transformative change options	Foresight
Serve members and influence development action	Foresight
Capture and explore innovative ideas for enhanced impact	Influence
Promote measurable collaboration for sustainable rural transformation	Collaboration
Alleviate hunger through coordinated donor actions for vulnerable people	Coordination
Coordinate donor actions to alleviate hunger for vulnerable people	Coordination

**2. CONTEXT**

**“What is happening around us that demands change? “**

The context was assessed by three breakout groups: one looked at so-called critical uncertainties (i.e. critical realities which the Platform cannot control and how to deal with them); one group analysed the results of the member feedback exercise; and one group analysed the lessons from the background paper on thematic multi-stakeholder networks.

**Critical uncertainties**

The group looking at critical uncertainties identified various realities from a wide array of dimensions:

- Changes in the nature and amounts of available development finance, sighting trends like reduction of finance, “financialisation” of development programs, and partnerships between donors and private sector.
- Emergence of social movements (both positive and negative), dominance of social nets as a transmission solution, and predominance of conflict narratives.
- Changes in the political landscape of the development agenda, the presence of a generally unstable political agenda, the presence of national vs global aspirations, development of a food systems thinking and governance.

- Ecological changes like climate change, emergence of pests diseases and new pathogens, depletion of natural resource base, increasing competition between ecology, and “technification”
- Changes in technology (innovation) and rural demographics brought about by migration, among other factors
- Capacity for organizational expertise

The groups then each selected two critical uncertainties and used a matrix to look at extreme scenarios and gave thoughts on what the role of the platform should be in each case.



**CRITICAL UNCERTAINTIES**  
 DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR OPERATING  
 IN A RANGE OF PLAUSIBLE-YET-UNPREDICTABLE FUTURES

### **Member Feedback exercise**

The group analysed the member feedback paper and had these insights:

- The Platform’s added-value to members is confirmed
- The Platform’s purpose should be driven by its function, which is shaped by the Board, the members, the Secretariat, and the working groups
  - The functionally driven purpose can give strategic structure to the working groups, increasing participation in those groups with presently low participation
  - The networking, relationship building, and knowledge sharing that is part of the Platform’s function, while valued, should have a clearly defined purpose
- The members in the group stated that “we want/need to be a bigger player, organizations [e.g., World Bank, MasterCard Foundation] should come to us”, which reflects the members’ desire for the Platform to have more relevance

### **Background Paper on Thematic Multi-Stakeholder Networks**

This group drew the following insights, which could influence the direction of the platform:

- The level of member ambition
- Having a commitment around a common agenda, both as a platform and as individual organisations to secure political buy-in
- Enabling collaboration on specific themes and ensuring flexibility and adaptability
- Having thought leadership – Listening and communicating
- Having a clearly defined membership but with a provision for broad stakeholder engagement.

The discussion generally showed a high level of agreement between the participants. It became clear that one of the key concerns is how the Platform can manage to be focused on

both a global and country level, and that the Platform's purpose needs to drive its form and functions. Participants also felt that it is difficult to discern the level of intervention. Occasionally, it was reported that the interest in thematic work had declined in some organisations.

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### **3. CHALLENGES**

#### **“What are the challenges we face in order to make progress? “**

Assessing the challenges faced by the Platform, the following questions were developed:

- How is it that the Platform can be both a convening/connecting group and focus on themes that improve ARD?
- How can we evaluate our value in both convening and thematic ways?
- How can the Platform be both a space for donors and work with stakeholders and partners? Both options were generally considered valuable. There are many ways to do that, but it's not clear yet how. Options are: Have more inclusive membership? Or donor membership with very clear ways of engaging?
- How can we find a new host?
- How must we focus so that we, the members, can see value and chances to participate when already strengthened?

#### **The participants had these responses to the questions raised:**

Q: How is it that the Platform can be both a convening/connecting group and focus on themes that improve ARD?

- The platform should have a clear focus and common purpose
- It should have significance and visibility
- It should identify its attractiveness and what value it adds
- It should be proactive to frame the development agenda
- It should strive to create a balance, i.e., focused vs broad, global vs national, and inward vs outward strategy
- It should become a recognised reference point for policy makers and practitioners.

Q: How can we evaluate our value in both convening and thematic ways?

- The platform should showcase impacts and results
- There should be provision of up to date relevant information
- The platform should measure performance

Q: How can the Platform be both a space for donors and work with stakeholders and partners?

- Both options were generally considered valuable. There are many ways to do that, but it's not clear yet how. Options are: More inclusive membership? Or donor membership with very clear ways of engaging?
- Here, participants highlighted challenges that included uneven member capacity (some donors have more resources to actively engage in the Platform than others), unclear definition of members, low participation and contribution.

Q: How can we find a new host? How must we focus so that we, members, can see value and chances to participate when already strengthened?

- Participants highlighted different challenges, including long term funding uncertainties and member commitment

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#### 4. BASELINE

**“What are the Platform’s current strengths that are valued by its members? “**

To assess the Platform’s baseline, participants were invited to fill a large Ecocycle pinboard. They listed all the Platform activities (either visible or behind the scenes) and placed them along the different parts of the Ecocycle. Activities that are “mature” mean they have proven to be successful and are valued by Platform members and target groups. In addition, participants named those activities and products that they consider to be dispensable (i.e. ready for “creative destruction”) in order to dedicate resources on new innovative ideas (“gestation” and “birth”).

All activities were posted onto the master Ecocycle pinboard and participants shared their understanding of activities and their placement (Table 2). While there was general agreement on where to place most of the activities, some groups had a different opinion/understanding about the current stage of some activities. These are marked in **yellow** in the table.

What Platform Members valued highest is that the Platform is a space to interact formally and informally, to meet with peers, and network for knowledge-sharing and informing policies. In particular, the following major strengths were named:

- Annual General Assembly and side-events
- Thematic Working Groups
- Communications/Information-sharing (e.g., website, eUpdate, publications, & Members Toolbox)
- Connecting people

**Table 2. Results of the master Ecocycle of the Donor Platform**

<b>ECOCYCLE RESULTS</b>					
<b>Gestation</b>	<b>Poverty trap</b>	<b>Birth</b>	<b>Maturity</b>	<b>Rigidity trap</b>	<b>Creative destruction</b>
Collection and Dissemination of Good Practices			Communication Products	Information provision on Climate & Gender	Social Media
			Member tool box		
			Dissemination of Publications		
			Dissemination of updates		
			Conference calls		
		Members Publications		Commissioning of background papers and reports	Commissioning Studies
		Webinars		Organising Webinars	
Supporting Food Systems Transformation	Donor mapping		Demand driven initiatives- Donor mapping		
Advocacy				Climate WG	WG – Climate change
		Youth Group	Rural Youth		
			Inclusive Agribusiness & Trade Group	Inclusive Agribusiness & Trade Group	
				Facilitation of Gender Theme	Gender-WG
				CAADP Knowledge	CAADP
External Side Events			Side Events		
2021 Summit (Land)			AGA		
Strategic Discussions				Advocacy	Analysis of Donor Behaviour in ARD
			Land Group		
Partner Dialogue	Strategic Partners	Consultations with Partners			
		Resource Mobilisation	Management, finances and staff	Board Meetings	
			Representation of platform by Secretariat		
			Responding to member inquiries		

## 5. AMBITION

In the exercises and the subsequent group and plenary discussion, the following added values of the Platform were identified:

1. Convening
2. Technical share for the working groups that are active
3. Connecting and building relationships
4. Unique format in an informal scale (where you can do things informally and pop up to formal level)
5. Includes donors of different types and from different places of the world (from North America, Australia, Europe, Africa)

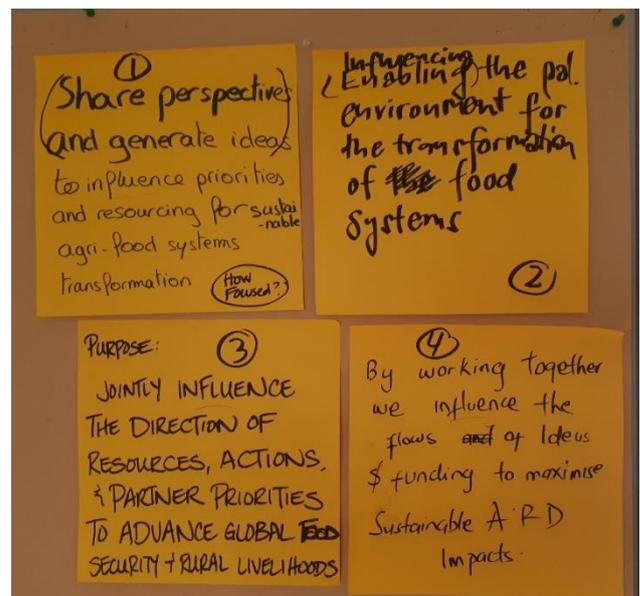
These strengths represent the Platform's success factors. Building on these, the participants discussed and developed their views on the Platform's overarching purpose and justification ("What is the magic sauce that gives both, purpose and legitimacy?" asked Nancy White). With a crowd-sourcing exercise, the participants shared their ideas for a purpose statement that they would consider to be the trademark of the Platform.

The top four purpose statements were:

1. Share perspectives and generate ideas to influence priorities and resourcing for sustainable agri-food systems transformation
2. Influencing/enabling the political environment for the transformation of food systems
3. Jointly influence the direction of resources, actions and partner priorities to advance global food security and rural livelihoods.
4. By working together, we, the Platform members, influence the flows of ideas and funding to maximise sustainable ARD impacts.

The Platform's Board later synthesized and refined these ideas to come up with a single purpose statement:

**"Members work together to influence ideas and resources for sustainable agriculture and food systems transformation."**



## 6. ACTION & EVALUATION

Following the members' retreat, wherein the group agreed that the Platform's transition must be guided by the principle of "form follows function", the Platform's Board Members held their meeting and put a call forward for member volunteers to be part of a Transition Task Force (TTF). TORs for the TTF are forthcoming. The TTF would initiate the next steps of the Platform's transition to a new host and have a roadmap for the process in place by the end of November 2019.

The Board expressed the need for the TTF to look at the proven strengths of the Platform but have an eye on 'creative destruction'. The TTF should communicate and exchange with members to create a sounding board, starting from the question "who are the people who should be involved in the Platform, but are not?" The TTF is to draft a list of current "wins" (i.e. benefits the Platform bestows and what works) and share it with the above mentioned sounding board and keep it up to date according to the feedback received. Some Platform members already declared their interest to actively work in the TTF (e.g. SDC, MEAE France, IADC and USAID).

The Platform issued a statement to be shared amongst its member and with the wider development community, summarizing the members' retreat and the Platform's transition.

### For further reference:

[Platform statement \(28 June 2019\)](#)