

## Sharing Knowledge Agrifood Networks - Bridging the gap, a Portuguese project with a global focus

### Duarte Bué Alves

Senior Diplomatic Adviser of the Minister  
of Agriculture and Sea, Portugal



### Luís Mira da Silva

President of INOVISA,  
Associate Professor – ULisboa / School of Agriculture  
Coordinator of the SKAN platform



[More information](#)

[www.skanplatform.org](http://www.skanplatform.org)

One year ago, the Portuguese Government officially launched the SKAN initiative – Sharing Knowledge Agrifood Networks ([www.skanplatform.org](http://www.skanplatform.org)). This was done in an auditorium full of farmers, researchers, representatives of academia, civil society, diplomatic corps, three ministers and few journalists. The initiative fully emerged in mid-2014, precisely in the International Year of Agricultural Farming, according to the decision of the United Nations.

It is not usual to bring together diplomacy and agriculture but it is exactly not only what CIHEAM has been doing for decades but also what SKAN promotes – international dialogue between relevant players both at political and diplomatic level, the business community, universities and academia from all over the World, with a main focus on three continents: Europe, Africa and Latin America.

### Why the SKAN initiative?

SKAN is an answer to global challenges, emerging needs and has a great potential.

Nowadays, the main challenge is the World population growth in the coming decades and the associated food security problem, namely in developing countries, that has to be addressed in a sustainable and responsible manner.

The efficiency of agrifood and forestry systems and the optimization of resource use, aimed at a green (and blue!) economic growth and social development are needed. The scenario is, of course, changing every day, but global international competition and emerging markets are a reality that has to be faced with creativity and resilience.

The potential is what we want it to be – a scientific and technological platform based on knowledge sharing, with room for valorisation to satisfy not only the existing needs but also those which are emerging.

SKAN's main objective is to promote knowledge and technology transfer and sharing between Europe, Africa and Latin America in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors. It aims to achieve this goal through an integrated approach that is focused on:

- 1) Strengthening the interplay between science and industry;
- 2) Integrating available resources, such as other networks and platforms, existing know-how, available scientific knowledge and funding sources for development and cooperation;
- 3) Enabling the development of international projects in consortium through a result oriented strategy;
- 4) Empowering local agents to ensure the sustainability of these projects.

Portugal has decided to launch this initiative for historical and political reasons: centuries of history have enriched our archives with a significant 'acquis' of knowledge that is extremely relevant to agriculture and forestry. Portuguese universities and research institutions have been developing for decades a structured and comprehensive approach to tropical agriculture, merging local know-how with international in-depth research. In fact, Portugal has a long history of looking abroad to create critical mass in scientific and technological development. This may explain why Portuguese universities and research institutions in the agrifood and forestry sectors have so many and so solid links with international partners. This is particularly true in Europe, Africa and America Latina, where it is possible to find numerous research projects and partnerships with Portuguese institutions.

In a diversified and every day more competitive World, Portugal has recognized that something had to be done with such 'acquis': it wouldn't make any sense to preserve it in dark libraries, miles away from where the fields are, where investors look at and – to sum up – where the needs are felt. Sharing knowledge and technology is therefore sharing what we are, because existing scientific and technological skills and knowledge can only be useful when applied to respond to real challenges, such as food safety and nutrition, food security, sustainable resource management or climate change.

#### Advantages of SKAN initiative

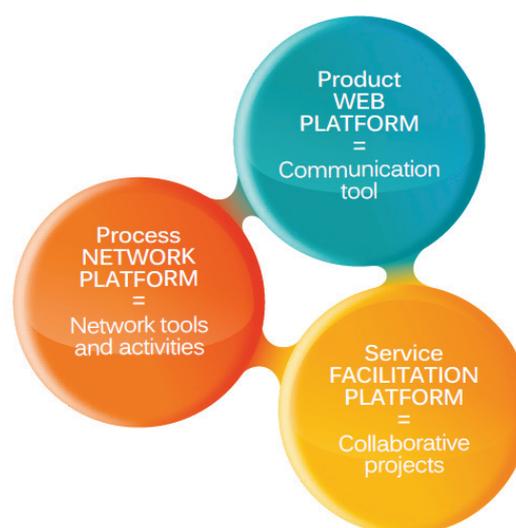
The vast majority of the research undertaken in the agrifood and forestry sectors do not belong to anyone – and in fact it is not to be owned. It is, by its nature, to be shared, and to be at the service of the international community. That is at the core of the SKAN initiative.

In a World full of complexities and uncertainties, one thing can be taken for sure: either we are able to innovate in every step of the way or someone will do it for us, take our place and go further. SKAN is also an engaged promoter of innovation, because creativity meets no boundaries when it comes to finding new answers to the needs of people in a World that is always reinventing itself.

We are fully aware, though, that in our societies financial resources are very limited. SKAN does not want to duplicate structures – on the contrary. It works mainly as an integrated Web and networking platform, where people can meet virtually, as in a social network, and presentially, in networking events (see Figure 1). Its Website is its basic tool, where not only information is shared but also where people can interact and projects initiated. It focuses on communication, bringing stakeholders together as a channel for sharing digital contents and information about agriculture and food. In addition, SKAN is also a platform to develop initiatives that put together a diversity of actors that may contribute to the development of the agrifood and forestry sectors, including farmers, business leaders, and researchers.

The third component of SKAN is a facilitation platform, a structure to promote the development of projects in consortium between international institutions from the research, business or public sectors, enhancing the potential of knowledge sharing and technology transfer. This facilitation platform can help to select partners, identify sources of financing, and structure the application, monitoring and evaluation of projects. It is therefore a natural extension of the Web and the networking platforms, increasing the overall potential of the SKAN initiative.

Figure 1  
The three SKAN Platform components



SKAN aims at working as a wealth and job promoter, hand in hand with the development of science and business promotion, in the context of a growing World population whose needs have to be met. SKAN is a tool to be used by Governments as well as civil society, whether these are farmers, companies, NGOs or associations in the agrifood and forestry sectors. It is also, openly, an instrument that Portugal wants to promote to bridge gaps between regions of the World that are geographically distant but close in science and research.

Though the SKAN initiative is a long term project that is just at its beginning, some positive outcomes can already be claimed for. Formal partnerships have already been developed with several countries, including Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde and Brazil. In only one year, already two large scale projects have been developed in Africa with the collaboration of the SKAN team. A new initiative, focused on the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (SKAN – CPLP), has recently obtained financing to pursue the same objectives in these countries. Leadership workshops for higher education and research institutions in the agrifood sector have been organized in several countries in Africa. And several workshops, seminars and technology brokerage events have been, and are currently being organized, in several countries in Africa and Latin America. All this has been undertaken while creating new or strengthening existing links with African and Latin American partners, but also with European institutions.

An initiative like this one usually takes time to take off and sometimes struggles to find its place amid the multiple networks and international partnerships that are created every year. This has not been the case with the SKAN platform. In fact, we believe that there is so much yet to be done when it comes to global challenges such as food security, agriculture development, or technology and knowledge transfer, that any initiative that is open, collaborative and functional can have an important contribution to our common future. We expect that this initiative can have a positive impact in these global challenges, having the capacity of strengthening the links and the collaboration between Europe, Africa and America Latina in the agrifood and forestry sectors. And in fact, if the SKAN Platform continues the fast track that has been achieved in the recent past, it will surely have a role to play.

As we approach the Ministerial meeting of CIHEAM in Portugal, later this year, it may be relevant to say that the geographical configuration of SKAN is far from static. We do not have in mind rigid models – on the contrary. SKAN is able to accommodate different views and to answer evolving needs. The “Mediterranean platform”, in its variety and richness, can also be a very challenging task for our project, bringing together the two different margins of our common sea.



### Next CIHEAM Ministerial Meeting in Portugal



The 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of the 13 Member countries of CIHEAM is being prepared. It will take place in Cascais on September 22 and 23, 2015, at the invitation of the Portuguese Authorities. It will focus on the theme “Better Mediterranean agriculture and food for better live”, addressing the need to implement applied agricultural research models based on Mediterranean networking and partnership.

As expressed by the Portuguese Minister of Agriculture and Sea, Mrs Assunção Cristas, 2015 is very rich in international events linked to the agricultural, food, fisheries and rural challenges. The Expo Milan 2015, the Blue Week in Lisbon, the Climate Conference in Paris or the definition of the agenda post-2015 will be at the core of the 2015 Year. Moreover, 2015 is the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

In this perspective, the 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture of CIHEAM’s member countries could be an opportunity to reaffirm the Mediterranean issues within the global agenda for development and to reinforce the place of food security for a better Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

### Blue Week 2015

In June 2015, Portugal will host the Blue Week, a meeting platform for all of those who care about the ocean. The Blue Week has three dimensions business dynamics, strategic thinking and political discussion. For a week, Portugal will become the world capital of the Ocean.

This will give rise to three important meetings:

1. World Ocean Summit (3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> June)
2. Ministerial Meeting (5<sup>th</sup> June)
3. Blue Business Forum (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> June)

[www.blueweek.pt](http://www.blueweek.pt)