

“Science and implementation? We’re one of the few to bridge the gap.”

Introducing the new SFSA Executive Director

From September 1, Simon Winter succeeds Marco Ferroni as Executive Director of the Syngenta Foundation. We asked Simon about farming, his recent past, thoughts for the future and some personal insights.



Why is smallholder agriculture so important to you?

Simon Winter: I first encountered serious poverty over 30 years ago in West Africa. I have felt a mission to address its causes ever since. Generally speaking, the people most at risk from poverty are smallholders and their rural neighbors. Combined with my personal drive come the broader issues of population growth and climate change. Both of these developments mean that helping smallholders raise their productivity and incomes is more important than ever. At the same time, robust economic growth has to be driven by value-addition in supply chains, supported by thriving farm operations, large and small.

If you had to choose a few key challenges in smallholder agriculture, which would you tackle first?

I see four priorities: functioning markets, risk-adaptation, smart use of technology and a tailored focus on certain groups’ special needs. Well-functioning and inclusive market systems are essential for attracting agricultural produce and putting money in smallholders’ pockets. Relying entirely on scientific breakthroughs or charitable handouts won’t work. Adaptation to risks such as climate change requires solutions for the future – today’s approaches won’t solve the problems of 2030. ‘Smart technology use’ involves making the very best of innovations, and leap-frogging previous infrastructure gaps or old ways of working. And fourthly, we have to remember that not everybody is the same. Women, the landless and youth all have special needs. In particular, making agriculture an attractive profession for young people is vital.

At your previous employer, TechnoServe, you were most recently Senior Vice President, Development. What was your principle focus in that role?*

Scaling up. A major example was in the coffee value chain, with a methodology that could double smallholders’ income. Inside and outside agriculture, my team worked on scaling up through small enterprise catalysts called ‘accelerators’.

*... and at the Mossavar-Rahmani Center**?*

The center is part of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. As a Senior Fellow there from 2015, I worked on improving my understanding of how to strengthen agriculture and food systems to address challenges such as climate change. Previous research had produced important theoretical insights and individual innovations, but has not bridged them into adoption at scale. Various actors, such as donors, governments and academia, have invested considerable efforts in this field, but without strong alignment. So I concentrated on pulling the many strands together: I am currently finishing off the resulting Working Papers.

What attracted you to the Syngenta Foundation (SFSA)?

There are several aspects that I particularly appreciate. In the development community, there is typically a large divide between science and implementation. SFSA is one of the few organizations that really tries to bridge that gap, both internally and with its many partners. Like I do, SFSA believes strongly in the importance of properly functioning markets. It also has a great team of talented people around the world; some I already knew, others I have met in recent weeks. The team is open, creative and willing to take well-judged risks. Thankfully, Syngenta makes that easier by strongly backing its Foundation, while also giving us a very free hand operationally. And for me, the company's acquisition by ChemChina adds an additional fascination – not least because the purchase agreement specifically mentions safeguards for continuing the Foundation's work.

“Syngenta strongly backs the Foundation, but gives us a very free hand”

What would you propose to do differently in future?

The focus on three core streams – Farmer Support Services, Risk Management and Seeds – is a strong feature of the SFSA approach. I think, however, that there are opportunities for greater integration, both between the streams, and with our cross-cutting work on R&D and Policy. In addition, I believe we have scope for strengthening our performance management. That involves, for example, studying and measuring initiatives' results and impact from an earlier stage and in more detail to deepen our understanding of what is working, or not.

How do you see the Foundation's engagement changing in China?

SFSA has long worked with Chinese partners. So far, cooperation has mainly focused on agricultural extension, GlobalGAP training and food safety. We are very open for further opportunities, for example helping China's many poorer and vulnerable smallholders to improve their income. We have developed a number of products and services from which Chinese agriculture could benefit. Examples include our crop traceability platform *Farmforce*, smallholder weather index insurance, and “AAA” maize, specially bred for tropical Asia. SFSA is also well placed to support China's international development initiatives, for example in technology transfer and the Agricultural Technology Development Centers in Africa. We shan't be rushing in, however, but will analyze carefully where our skills can best support smallholder agriculture, in partnership with Chinese organizations.

What piece of professional advice have you found most useful in your career?

“Do your homework”. I learned that the hard way, in a team many years ago that didn't prepare carefully enough!

How would former team members describe your management style?

Participatory and empowering. The challenges we try to address are too complex and broad for individuals to tackle alone. My focus has been on getting team members to advance themselves and the teams' results by taking on new challenges and helping them access needed guidance and tools.

What do you do outside work?

Family life is my main focus. My wife and I have two teenage children. Physical fitness plays an important role for all of us. I also enjoy the creative arts, and their links to creativity in the workplace.

For Simon Winter's biography, see <https://www.syngentaoundation.org/foundations-team>

*<http://www.technoserve.org/> ** <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg>