

Dr. Bram Govaerts

BELGIUM

Recipient of the 2014 Norman Borlaug Award for Field Research and Application

Dr. Govaerts, 36, currently serves as Associate Director of the Global Conservation Agricultural Program at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT).

In developing his vision to help poor farmers increase food production from their existing farmland, Dr. Govaerts was inspired by the great agricultural scientist and World Food Prize Founder Norman Borlaug's credo: "Take It to the Farmer." To that end, Dr. Govaerts was instrumental in framing the Mexican government's major initiative known as the Sustainable Modernization of Traditional Agriculture (MasAgro), and, in June 2014, he assumed leadership of the entire program, with responsibility for coordinating the evolution of related projects in Latin America.

The component of MasAgro that Dr. Govaerts originally developed and has successfully led is named "Take It to the Farmer." It focuses on integrating technological innovation into small-scale farming systems for maize and wheat crops, while minimizing detrimental impacts on the environment. Under this extension-style program, farmers on over 94,000 hectares switched to sustainable systems using MasAgro technologies, while farmers on another 600,000 hectares are receiving training and information to improve their techniques and practices.

"Dr. Govaerts has used creative and innovative approaches in applying science to improving farming systems, to focus on farmers as development catalysts, and to restore a sense of pride among farmers and those who serve them," Quinn said. "Using cell phone technology and social media, YouTube videos and educational events, his work has led to impressive achievements in the adoption of his integrated technologies by farmers, policy changes at the governmental level, and institutional alignment for the implementation of conservation agriculture."

His passion for working with farmers to provide them with the full range of tools they need to rise out of subsistence farming is summed up by Dr. Govaerts: "The best recognition of Dr. Borlaug's legacy is to be conscious and shout out loud that farming is the future. It is our moral duty as researchers to bring pride back to the fields by harnessing the existing innovations of farmers and other value chain actors and fostering capacity and application of science and technology."

Dr. Govaerts' research and field application in conservation and sustainable agriculture has focused on the benefits of improving long-term soil quality in both irrigated and rain-fed regions through leaving surface residues on the land and reducing tillage activities while diversifying crops. Evidence gathered during his research has shown that when farmers used this method, crop yields increased on average in the rain fed areas by 30 to 40 percent and production costs fell by 10 percent in irrigated systems, resulting in a positive impact on household income.

Dr. Govaerts worked extensively in Ethiopia in a network of local universities and non-governmental organizations to extend conservation agriculture technologies for the smallholder farmers in the country's highland areas as part of his Ph.D. research. He has also developed close interactions with India in rice-wheat systems through active South-South exchange of remote sensing technologies and smart mechanization prototypes. Currently he supports efforts in Central America to apply the lessons learned from MasAgro's "Take it to The Farmer" to Guatemala and other countries through strong interactions with a local NGO and interactions with the local government institutions.

Dr. Govaerts has been a leader in putting into practice a vision for development and promotion of better agricultural practices to improve farmers' incomes and livelihoods, safeguard the environment and foster food security in the face of climate change. His energy and commitment inspire those around him, in the same way that Dr. Borlaug motivated and inspired colleagues, partners, policymakers and farmers.