



SCALING UP INNOVATIONS TO MODERNISE AFRICAN FOOD SYSTEMS

A Report of TAAT's Side Event at the Science Days of the UN Food System Summit

Science, research and innovation are essential to accelerate the transformation to healthier, more sustainable, more equitable and more resilient food systems. What scientific innovations are needed and how they can inform related policies were put on the front burner at the Science Days, a virtual conference organised by the Scientific Group to the UN Food Systems Summit and facilitated and hosted by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization 8-9 July 2021.

The conference was declared opened by the FAO Director-General QU Dongyu, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohamed, Special Envoy for the Food Systems Summit Agnes Kalibata, and Chair of Scientific Group for the UN Food Systems Summit, Joachim von Braun.

Discussions at the conference were informed by a strategic paper prepared by members of the Scientific Group, which was presented on the first day of the conference, and a series of papers by partners of the Scientific Group. In 17 different sessions, speakers from all over the world discussed science, technology and innovation for food systems transformation. The goal was to support the agenda-setting process of the Food Systems Summit with scientific evidence and perspectives.

Equally, more than 40 Side-Events preceded the Science Days on 5-7 July. The side events offered an opportunity for research and knowledge organisations to present their insights on the topic. The pre-Science Days event sought to examine the impact of scientific innovations and partnerships on food systems and how these can help African farmers build climate and food resilience across agro-ecological zones. It unveiled opportunities for deepening technology delivery, linking various research innovations to impact delivery in Africa through a complementary convergence of science and technology, favourable policies, strong support institutions and services, and access to finance and markets.

One of such events was the side event on scaling up innovations to modernise African food systems, held on the 7th July 2021 at 14h00 (GMT).

Organised by Technologies for African Agricultural Transformation (TAAT) in collaboration with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), The WorldFish Centre, International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, the side event provided vistas on TAAT's efforts at transforming African food systems through technology delivery and innovative partnerships that drive food security, deliver better nutrition, reduce poverty, and strengthen food systems.

Dr Nteranya Sanginga, DG IITA, in his opening remarks at the side event, commended the organisers for bringing the community together to address food challenges in Africa. He stated that the impact of COVID-19 had demonstrated the need for Africa to fortify its food systems, and TAAT is a classic example of the path that Africa needs to take to address its food challenge. “I urge you to identify partnership models that are effective for the modernisation of Africa’s food system,” he advised. Represented by IITA Director of Development and Delivery, Dr Alfred Dixon, the DG averred that the impact of the coronavirus in recent times had demonstrated the need for Africa to fortify its food systems. This meeting, according to him, “must develop urgent and dramatic steps to salvage the food systems and put Africa on the path of self-sustenance and prosperity. For too long Africa has suffered from the vagaries of climate change, pests and diseases and ineffective food and market systems, but on the flip side, there are also several innovations on the continent. This is the time to harness those innovations for Africa’s shared prosperity.

Dr Sanginga concluded by lauding TAAT as a classic example of the trajectory that Africa needs to take to address its food challenges. In a very short period, TAAT’s interventions in several African countries have lifted millions out of poverty, creating jobs and wealth, and more importantly, addressing the question of hunger and malnutrition. As we deliberate on this subject, I urge you to identify partnership models for modernisation of Africa’s food systems,” he added.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) Director for Agriculture and Agro-Industry, Dr Martin Fregene, in his keynote address, focused on innovative pathways and partnerships for modernising African food systems. He said that Africa needs to raise its productivity by putting the best available technology in the hands of farmers. He added that revamping marketing and distribution by introducing wholesale market infrastructure will help African farmers get out of their poverty cycle. Also, modernising consumption by diversifying the food basket towards foods and vegetables will reduce obesity and malnutrition among African children. “Modernising food safety is important as it will improve food quality for consumers through investment in laboratory infrastructure for cross-border trade,” he added.

IITA Deputy Director General, Partnerships for Delivery, Dr Kenton Dashiell, spoke on innovation and partnerships to strengthen African food systems during the second keynote address. He noted that TAAT raises agricultural productivity and improves seed systems by deploying proven agricultural technologies to the continent’s farmers. “One of the many ways TAAT has organised to deploy the best technology is developing a Technology Catalogue for different crops and livestock,” he said. Dr Dashiell provided links to download the TAAT catalogues to all participants while highlighting the role of the private sector in the TAAT programme - driving long-term sustainable agribusiness growth.

An expert panel comprising Prof Bernadette Fregene, TAAT Aquaculture Leader, WorldFish Centre, Dr Ramadjita Tabo, ICRISAT’s Regional Director West and Central Africa, and Dr Robin Buruchara, Senior Advisor, The Pan Africa Bean Research Alliance (PABRA) of the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT highlighted the contributions of TAAT compacts led by their respective institutions towards strengthening Africa’s food systems, including building the capacity of over 23,000 aquaculture value chain actors on pond and hatchery management,

handling and processing, storage and preservation, and product development for household consumption.

Around 500 participants from research, policy, civil society and industry participated via zoom, Youtube and Facebook streaming in the side event which examined how to unlock the full potential of science, technology, and innovation to achieve more healthy diets and more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable food systems.

During the question and answer session, issues bordering on how to push the frontiers of bio-science; advance digitalisation in food systems; strengthen the science-policy interface; invest in capacity for science and innovation; engage indigenous peoples, women, youth and the private sector in food systems transformation; resolve contentious issues hindering innovations, and prioritise urgent actions needed by 2030 and beyond, were adequately addressed.