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New project launched to improve rural livelihoods and food security in Mali

The newly initiated Climate Smart Agricultural Technologies (CSAT) project was recently launched in Mali at an event held on 19–22 March.

The launch ceremony had in attendance the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Innovation and Scientific Research in Mali; the Director General, Institute of Rural Economy (IER); the Ambassador, Norwegian Embassy in Mali; IITA Deputy Director General, Research for Development (DDG-R4D); and representatives of other organizations, including the International Crops Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT).

This research-for-development project will promote and scale up technologies to help producers adapt to the effects of climate change in the Sahel. In addition to scaling up existing technologies, researchers will develop additional options to make better technologies available to different actors, including the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to receive real-time information on climate and crop pests.

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Project partners at the event link hands in a symbolic gesture.

DG Sanginga to be awarded honorary title of doctor *honoris causa* from KU Leuven, Belgium

The Academic Council of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) has nominated DG Nteranya Sanginga to receive the doctor of *honoris causa*.

The award will be conferred on the 20th anniversary of VLIR-UOS, an organization that supports partnerships between higher education institutions in Flanders and the South.

The five partner universities under VLIR-UOS will host a ceremony to confer a total of five honorary doctorate degrees—one from each university—on individuals with exceptional distinction whose work is relevant to the mission of VLIR-UOS.

KU Leuven is Belgium's largest and highest ranked university. As the oldest university in the Low Countries, it has a centuries-long tradition of conferring honorary doctorates in recognition of extraordinary scientific, social, or cultural achievements.

VLIR-UOS supports partnerships between universities and university colleges in Flanders and in the South, looking for innovative responses to global and local challenges. They achieve this by:

- Stimulating cooperation projects between professors, researchers, and teachers.
- Giving scholarships to students and professionals in Flanders and the South.
- Supporting and strengthening higher education in the South as well as global development-based internationalization of higher education in Flanders.

In a letter, Prof Luc Sels, Rector of KU Leuven, said that in conferring the title of doctor honoris causa to Sanginga, the university community "wishes to recognize you for your visionary leadership of IITA, which you have turned into a research-for-development organization that enables African scientists to partner up with colleagues and institutions from all over the world."

Sels further said, "We also want to recognize your contributions to the transformation of sub-Saharan agriculture, and your efforts to improve African farmers' health and quality of life. Together with your team, you have helped reduce poverty in the area, improve food security, and increase youth employment. Taken together, your achievements definitely warrant our university's highest distinction."

The other nominees are Professor Claric Garcia Borges Demetrio, Mr Jose Ramon Saborido Loido, Mrs Leymah Gbowee, and Dr Jean-Jacques Muyembe Tamfun.

The award will be conferred on 15 May at a ceremony to be hosted by VLIR-UOS at KU Leuven in Brussels, Belgium.

IITA Director General, Dr Nteranya Sanginga.

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The CSAT project, financed by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway in Mali, will run for a period of five years (2019–2024). Ambassador Ole Andreas Lindeman stated that the partnership with IITA is important particularly in the context of Norway's strategic objectives with regard to Mali. "For one thing both countries share extreme weather conditions and the effects of climate change," he said.

The project aims to (i) reduce poverty and food insecurity; (ii) protect natural resources; and (iii) grow farmers' incomes through increased agricultural productivity, access to markets, and promoting the creation and/or strengthening of agribusiness enterprises, especially those run by women and youth. The project will provide farmers with options to increase their resilience and the ability to adapt to the effects of climate change.

IITA DDG-R4D, May-Guri Saethre, in her speech noted: "The economy, environment, and conflict have contributed to both seasonal migration and emigration. IITA believes that investment in agricultural R4D can help address some of these problems."

At least 20,000 rural households will directly benefit from interventions in four regions of Mali (Kayes, Koulikoro, Ségou, and Sikasso). Overall, project activities are expected to result in more than a 20% increase in crop yield and a 15% increase in household income. The project will strengthen 250 agricultural enterprises and facilitate the creation of 100 new agribusinesses run by young people and women. In addition, 600 young graduates and rural people will be trained in agribusiness. Trained youth will benefit from local business-building opportunities and become role models for other young people.

The interventions will have two main components: the dissemination of intelligent and recognized technologies, ready for use against climate change, and research to develop fresh innovations throughout the value chain.

The project will be coordinated by IITA, in partnership with IER, ICRISAT, the Norwegian Institute for Research on Bioeconomy (NIBIO), the Department of International Studies in Environment and Development of the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU-Noragric). Other partners include extension service providers, seed companies, producer organizations, women and youth, and Malian NGOs.

IITA DDG-R4D, Dr May-Guri Saethre (middle), was in Mali for the launch.

IITA and partners to develop recommendations for food production efficiency

IITA will lead an initiative to develop recommendations for sustainable nitrogen management strategies to improve food and energy production within the Lake Victoria catchment. The Institute will work in collaboration with the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC) and other stakeholders, while aiming to minimize environmental pollution.

This followed a two-day workshop held in Kisumu on 5–6 March where stakeholders drawn from research organizations and institutes of higher learning met to come up with workplans for optimizing nitrogen use efficiency in the region. Scientists were drawn from IITA, Lake Victoria Basin Secretariat, the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Makerere University, the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), the Tanzania Agricultural Research Institute (TARI), and representatives of Kisumu Water and Sewerage Company Ltd and Lake Victoria South Water Services Board.

Under the auspices of the International Nitrogen Management Systems (INMS), affiliate institutes will carry out research within the Lake Victoria basin in line with identified gaps within the WAGES (i.e., Water quality, Air quality, Greenhouse gas balance, Ecosystem services, and Soil quality) framework to address the too little–too much nitrogen paradox in the region.

IITA-Cameroon Head of Station, Cargele Masso, who is also in charge of the INMS project, led the workshop. Masso stated that INMS will carry out in-depth research on the practices around the Lake basin to inform policy and package messages through effective channels that will reach more than 45 million people living in the Lake Victoria basin.

"We would like to address the scientific gap so that science can inform policy making in the Lake basin region for a stronger enforcement and implementation of legal and policy frameworks to operationalize efficient nitrogen management," said Masso.

Guest of honor and LVBC Executive secretary, Dr Ally-Said Matano, pointed out the urgent need to address efficient nitrogen use due to the rapidly increasing population in the Lake Victoria basin.

"My wish as well as that of LVBC is that you come up with a clearly defined roadmap to achieving good nitrogen management for and beyond East Africa, to optimize food and energy production, while minimizing environmental pollution," said Matano.

Scientists in the meeting resolved to work with communication specialists to not only package messages, but to align messages to the most relevant audiences—knowledge consumers. They also made similar commitments to bridge policy–science knowledge gaps in EAC Partner States.

The scientific evidence generated by the East Africa Demonstration Site of INMS will contribute to inform policy decisions by the member states for good nitrogen management.

INMS Scientist and stakeholders who gathered in Kisumu, Kenya to develop strategies for sustainable Nitrogen use in the Lake basin.

Got a story to share?

Please send your story with photos and captions every Tuesday to iita-news@cgiar.org or Katherine Lopez (k.lopez@cgiar.org) and Uzoma Agha (u.agha@cgiar.org) for headquarters and Western Africa, Catherine Njuguna (c.njuguna@cgiar.org) for Eastern and Southern Africa, and David Ngome (d.ngome@cgiar.org) for Central Africa.

One on one: Laura Cortada-Gonzalez:
A journey in science

Dr Laura Cortada-Gonzalez is IITA Soil Health Scientist based in Kenya. In this interview, Cortada-Gonzalez talks about how she started in science and her journey so far as a scientist.

Laura Cortada-Gonzalez spending time with family.

Q: As an upcoming young female scientist at IITA, did you always want to pursue a science career?

A: Actually not. Surprisingly, when I was a young girl, I was told I had skills towards the social sciences. But there was nothing in those fields that I felt passionate about, so I decided to pursue science studies because I was fascinated by biology and how organisms and ecosystems work. It was much later when I realized that I was naturally curious about nature and my surroundings, and that I wanted to find answers to many questions. I found that science was 'the art' to find answers to those many questions.

Q: Tell us about your journey into studying nematodes and why nematodes?

A: When I was doing my BSc in Biology, I studied integrated pest management (IPM). I found that biological control was a fascinating discipline—how to use nature to control nature. Later, when I studied Technical Agriculture Engineering, I took a complete IPM course and I started a lab internship with the lecturers, who happened to be nematologists. I realized how interesting and relevant, yet how understudied this discipline is. I won a PhD scholarship to study biological control of root-knot nematodes. That's how it all started.

Q: What has been your biggest challenge in your science career?

A: Probably the biggest challenge all scientists must face is making personal and professional life compatible, especially after the arrival of children to the family. Science is a very competitive field and, at times, it is difficult not to feel you are underperforming, both scientifically and as a parent, with not enough time dedicated to either. Also, realizing that you have to slow down in comparison with other colleagues if you want to try to balance both aspects—you can't be everywhere. And that makes you look like you are dragging your feet, compared to your male colleagues.

Q: What uniqueness do you bring into the research field as a woman?

A: I don't think I am bringing any particular uniqueness just because I am a woman, but it is true that at times we are more sensitive to gender-related issues, both in the workplace and in the field environment, which conditions our research.

As an example, I was recently told that one of our female research associates in Uganda, when resuming from maternity leave, was pumping milk for her baby in her car. That's not the way things should be—our workplace should be able to embrace women in all stages of their professional and personal life. Together with Brigitte and Janet from Sendusu, we've now come up with a pumping room where mums can have a quiet time at the workplace and be able to continue breastfeeding their children. Having such facilities is key for providing welfare and supporting women to be more productive and less stressed in their workplace. What we are advocating for in the field, namely breastfeed children to maximize nutrition in the early stages of life, should also be enabled for our workers.

Q: What unique challenges do women face in their science career?

A: Challenges faced by young female researchers include: First, because we are women and young (presumably inexperienced), our scientific outcomes tend not to be well echoed by an audience of middle-aged men that currently dominates academia. Our statements are at times "overheard" by our own colleagues, sometimes even until a man repeats or reshapes the same idea. Second, our ability to lead teams is sometimes questioned. A woman trying to balance her personal and professional life can be perceived as a weak leader—either unsuitable for or lacking dedication to the task. Fortunately though, we have lots of male colleagues and mentors who are very supportive and who empower their young female staff. And we have examples of this in IITA.

Q: What would you tell young students who want to venture into science but are afraid?

A: Science is not just maths, physics, chemistry, or biology. Science is being curious, passionate, persistent, determined, honest, and hard working. These are qualities that apply both to men and women. So, I would say: Go for it! A scientific career is like a marathon, a long-standing effort, but very beautiful.

Q: What should IITA and other research institutes do to attract more women scientists?

A: Ensuring policies that can support a good balance between professional and personal life is something that is key to attract both talented women and men. But supporting women that would eventually like to become mothers or that have small babies would be key, such as by taking it into account in performance appraisals and career evaluations, because of the impact that maternity leave or a pregnancy or breastfeeding period would have. Also, creating awareness among male supervisors on their needs during such special periods. A flexible work schedule is also something important for parents of both sexes during early childhood stages. Certain duty stations can be challenging at times because of cultural constraints that undermine the role of women.

Q: Who are some of your mentors and role models? How important are mentors and role models for girls in science?

A: Since the start, my PhD supervisors always encouraged me to give the best and never thought I would underperform for being a woman. My best mentors have actually been all men who had a well-balanced personal and professional career but were also passionate about their job. They always made me feel there was space for me to grow professionally while I was growing personally. They have been very understanding, and my current supervisor Danny Coyne is no exception. I have also come across teams led by women who could not see the person beyond the scientist: the daughter, the mother, the sister, the partner. We women should support each other more at times and embrace the diversity of our personal choices in life.

Plant health delegation visits IITA Abuja in preparation for international conference

In preparation for a global event that will bring quarantine service practitioners from across the world to Nigeria to deliberate on curtailing the spread of pests and diseases across continents, a three-member delegation led by Mr John Obaje, Director of Plant Quarantine Planning, Nigerian Agricultural Quarantine Service (NAQS), visited IITA-Abuja Station on 14 February.

The purpose of the visit was to talk to IITA-Abuja about the planned conference on plant health and their intention to bring the participants to IITA for a field visit.

Receiving the delegation, Head of IITA-Abuja Station, Gbassey Tarawali, expressed IITA's delight to oblige and partner with the NQAS on the proposed conference scheduled to take place in the third quarter of 2019. He assured the meeting of IITA's support for the successful hosting of the international conference.

Abuja Station Manager Gbassey Tarawli meeting with NAQS delegates.

CocoaSoils holds maiden baseline coordinators' meeting and training of enumerators

The Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of the CocoaSoils Program has organized its maiden coordinators' meeting and training of enumerators for Ghana, at the Cocoa Research Institute of Ghana in Tafo. The event was held on 20–21 March to have a common understanding and agree on the methodology of the baseline tool to be used across the four countries in West Africa.

Sixteen enumerators and four baseline coordinators attended the training from Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria. This was followed by a demonstration of the tool carried out by the enumerators and coordinators in Obodanase, a cocoa-growing village in the Eastern Region of Ghana.

Enumerator training in the other three countries will take place between 8 and 17 April. Data collection for the baseline survey is due to commence in April and will run concurrently in the different regions.

Coordinator explaining the baseline tool to enumerator-participants.