

IITA, national partners launch project to promote agric commercial products

Many smallholder farmers in Africa fall prey to fake products or placebos that tout miraculous increases in harvests – investing their little hard-earned money on a promise that never comes. To address this, IITA launched this week in Tanzania the second phase of the Commercial Products (COMPRO-II) project that aims to benefit two million smallholder farmers in East and West Africa by providing information on which agricultural products are genuinely effective to boost their production among the myriad currently available in the market.

COMPRO-II envisions that in five years 420,000 farmers will have tested at least one commercial product proven to be effective and endorsed by the project, with half of them adopting the technology and achieving at least 15-30% increase in their yields.

The project will also support national institutions in setting up sustainable quality control systems to safeguard farmers from substandard and ineffective agricultural commercial products coming into the market. COMPRO-II will be implemented in Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, and Tanzania.

COMPRO-II aims to institutionalize quality assurance mechanisms and facilitate the rapid dissemination of top quality agricultural commercial products proven to increase yields and improve the food security of smallholder farmers in the region. The 5-year project is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation through a grant to IITA.

It builds on the findings and successes of the first phase of the project in which researchers, together with farmers, evaluated the effectiveness of over 100 commercial products in the markets and identified three effective ones that enhanced yields by 15-30%. These products include Rhizobium inoculants for legumes, mycorrhizal inoculants for banana, and fertilizer seed coating for maize.

“We have many of these products in the market, which, like witchdoctors’ potions, promise to solve all the farmers’ problems. What concerns us is that our poor farmers are using whatever little money they have to pay for products that are virtually fakes. To help them, we set out to identify and evaluate products that do produce positive results and endorse them,” said Dr. Nteranya Sanginga, Director General of IITA.

The second phase will primarily focus on creating awareness and disseminating to farmers these tried and tested quality products and building the capacity of national systems to continue screening such products coming into the market.

“The project will engage with and support national institutions to put in place systems to continue screening these products to check their quality and effectiveness. This will ensure farmers are not wasting money on products that do not work,” said Dr Prem Warrior, Senior Program Officer with the foundation.

In the last decade, sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a rapid population increase and rising demand for food. Consequently, investments in soil fertility are of utmost importance to increase agricultural productivity, and access to agricultural inputs is required to achieve this goal. But more than having access to inputs, quality assurance of agricultural inputs is critical to protect farmers, retailers, wholesalers, and importers, and to minimize health and environmental hazards.

For instance, new biofertilizers, biopesticides, and chemical agro-inputs have been commercialized, but these products are often insufficiently evaluated for quality and efficacy due to weak national and regional regulatory systems.

In the launch speech read by Dr Fidelis Myaka, Director of Research and Development, on behalf of the Hon. Eng Christopher Kajoro Chiza, Tanzania’s Minister of Agriculture, he

said that “COMPRO-II fits very well with the country’s initiatives of ensuring the quality of agricultural products that our farmers use.”

“Similar to COMPRO-I, we evaluated, through identified research stations, several agricultural products for their chemical composition, microbiological attributes, and agronomic effectiveness using established protocols,” Myaka said. “And similar to the findings of COMPRO-I, we found only two products that can increase [rice] yields by 15-30%.”

“The capacity of our people to conduct this type of evaluation, as well as our related laboratory facilities, is still limited. I believe that COMPRO-II will contribute much in building our human, physical, and financial resources to identify truly effective products and disseminate these to farmers.”

By the end of the project, more farmers are expected to confidently use these products because their safety, efficacy, and quality will be ensured through institutionalized regulatory and quality assurance mechanisms.

“We want to make farmers’ lives better. Combining good cultural practices, and using fertilizers and improved varieties, and COMPRO-II-certified products, farmers can get better yields, leading to enhanced incomes and a generally better quality of life,” said Bernard Vanlauwe, IITA Director for Central Africa and the project’s coordinator.

Under COMPRO-II, IITA will work with the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa – Soil Health Program (AGRA), Farm Input Promotions (FIPS), the Tropical Soil Biology and Fertility Research Area of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (TSBF-CIAT), the Centre for Agricultural Bioscience International (CABI), and universities, national research organizations, extension organizations, and quality control entities in the six project countries.



Left: Dr Fidelis Myaka, Director of Research and Development, formally launching COMPRO-II. He represented the Hon. Eng Christopher Kajoro Chiza, Tanzania’s Minister of Agriculture, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Right: Participants pose for a souvenir photo.

IITA signs a 5-year agreement with Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

On 8 May, in Leuven, IITA signed a five-year agreement with the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven). KU Leuven is a research-intensive, internationally oriented university that carries out both fundamental and applied research. IITA and KU Leuven have a long-standing collaboration of more than 25 years in banana breeding, physiology, and agronomy as well as in soil fertility and nitrogen fixation. KU Leuven staff members are or have been members of the IITA board (i.e., Prof. Edmond De Langhe, Prof. Eric Tollens, and Prof. Roel Merckx).

The agreement aims to encourage the existing collaboration concerning (but not limited to):

- Research and development
- Development of joint research and development project proposals
- Organization of joint research activities
- Organization of joint conferences and workshops
- Exchange of research and teaching personnel
- Placement and/or exchange of students
- Exchange of research materials, and
- Exchange of publications and other materials of common interest.



DG Nteranya Sanginga (right) with Prof. Dr. Ir. Bart De Moor Vice-Rector, International Policy, KUL.

IITA now a member of Agricultural Transformation implementation council

The Nigerian government has made IITA a member of the Agricultural Transformation Implementation Council (ATIC) to help unlock the huge potential of the agricultural sector and regain its lost glory.

The ATIC is chaired by Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan, and will provide oversight for the agricultural transformation agenda of the country.

According to Pres. Jonathan, the ATIC will consist of the following subgroups:

- Agricultural Value Chains Group: this will focus on increasing the productivity, value addition, and linkage to markets for all priority agricultural commodities.
- Agricultural Infrastructure Group: this will work on stimulating private sector investments through increased provision of public goods for strategic value chains.

- Agricultural Finance and Investment Group: this will focus on developing conducive environments to stimulate private sector investments along strategic commodity value chains. It will also focus on leveraging commercial bank financing into agriculture at affordable rates.

These groups will each be tasked with the development and implementation of coordinated interventions to rapidly grow the agricultural sector and turn Nigeria away from being a food-import-dependent economy, to a self-sufficient and food-export-economy.

IITA will be represented in the ATIC by Director General Nteranya Sanginga.

At the inauguration of the ATIC which took place on 14 May, at the Presidential Villa in Abuja, Dr Abebe Menkir, represented Dr Sanginga.



Market in Lagos.

Announcements

IITA will be hosting two major meetings next week:

1. Annual Review and Planning Meeting, Integrated Striga Management Project in Africa (ISMA), Conference Center, 21-24 May and
2. AfDB Implementation Support Mission, Boardroom 1/Musa Room, 21-25 May

R4D Review on crop improvement now available

The 8th edition of the R4D Review is now available online at www.rd4review.org. This issue commemorates the 45th anniversary of IITA. It focuses on the successes, challenges, and prospects of the genetic improvement programs which have been the cornerstone of IITA's success in improving food crop production in SSA. These innovations in genetic improvement, together with supportive policies and training, have dramatically improved crop productivity and lifted millions out of poverty.

IITA was established in 1967 to increase and improve food crop production, and soil and crop management for sustainable agricultural development. The Institute has become integral to the quest by sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to attain food and income security.

For the last 45 years, IITA has delivered over 70% of the impact from the CGIAR in sub-Saharan Africa. The Institute has achieved this by focusing on key tropical food crops, such as banana and plantain, cassava, cowpea, maize, soybean, yam, and tree and vegetable crops.

This latest issue was coedited by Lava Kumar and Kathy Lopez.

