IITA
Research to Nourish Africa
Issue No. 2181 15-19 July 2013

Special issue: 6th Africa Agriculture Science Week

Africa Agriculture Science Week: How can Africa feed Africa?

Efforts by Africans to feed themselves and escape the food importation trap and put the continent on the path to economic growth must give attention to soil fertility, according to DG Nteranya Sanginga.

Addressing participants at the 6th Africa Agriculture Science Week (AASW) organized by the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) in Accra, Dr Sanginga highlighted the impact of agricultural research over the years and concluded that Africa must adopt scientific innovations and pay attention to natural resource management to drive the agricultural development agenda.

"The issue of soil fertility must be addressed if Africa wants to feed itself," he said.

Dr Sanginga expressed optimism for Africa's agricultural transformation, highlighting the increasing attention governments on the continent are putting on agriculture.

However, he reiterated that efforts need to focus on restoring soil fertility, creating an enabling environment for market policies, and developing more resilient and productive farm systems.

The 6th AASW provided an opportunity for Africans and partners to rethink the commitment by African governments 10 years ago which also led to the establishment of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP).

CAADP focuses on improving food security, nutrition, and increasing incomes in Africa's largely farming based economies. It aims to do this by raising agricultural productivity by at least 6% per year and increasing public investment in agriculture to 10% of national budgets per year. So far, only a few countries have met the CAADP targets.

Dr Kanayo Nwanze, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), in his keynote address, said that there is still a lot to be done in the context of the ever-changing and increasing challenges choking agricultural development in Africa.

He noted that the world is producing enough but that the food is not reaching those that need it most.

"We must put our efforts both in improving productivity and reducing postharvest losses," he added.

The IFAD President called for a paradigm shift in addressing food insecurity in Africa.

According to him, research and development need to be "repositioned" into research for development to bring the benefits of research to the farm.

He advised scientists to ensure that their research corresponds with the reality on the ground and that it addresses the challenges of development empirically.

DG Sanginga talked about "African Agricultural Science: Highlights from Scientific Partners" during day 1 of the FARA General Assembly.

IITA participates in Africa Agriculture Science Week 2013

The 6th Africa Agriculture Science Week 2013 at the Accra International Conference Center in Ghana ends this week. The week-long meeting is convened by FARA.

This gathering of all stakeholders involved in African agricultural development brings together representatives of FARA's constituents including African and non-African institutions such as the subregional organizations (ASARECA, CORAF/WECARD, CCARDESA and NASRO), farmers' and pastoralists' organizations, agricultural research institutions, agricultural educational institutions including universities. Other stakeholders include the national agricultural research systems, non-African advanced research institutions, international agricultural research centers, international NGOs, policy makers, private sector, Ministries of Agriculture, Education, Science and Technology, national and regional parliamentary subcommittees on agriculture, and Africa's development partners.

IITA organized a side event titled "Productivity, Processes, People: Adding Value to Cassava" on 16 July, with presentations and discussions by IITA staff and partners. SARD-SC also organized its own side event called Partners, Possibilities, and Prospects held on 15 July (see related stories in this issue).

IITA also took part in the "Marketplace" as part of the CGIAR exhibition showcase.

Snapshot: Africa Agriculture Science Week 2013, Accra, Ghana

Above left: A view of the entrance hall of the Accra International Conference Center. Above right (from left): DG Sanginga with partners, including Africa Rice Center DG Papa Seck and IFAD President Kanayo Nwanze. Below: At the CGIAR booth: scientists from ILRI in a discussion (left) and Humidtropics Director Kwesi Atta-Krah being interviewed by social media reporters.

From left, clockwise: IITA Plant Pathologist Ranajit Bandyopadhyay doing an interview; Piers Bocock, Director of Communication and Knowledge Management (left), and Frank Rijsberman, CEO of the CGIAR Consortium Office (right) show off the CGIAR booth; R4D Director Robert Asiedu and SLARI Director General Alfred Dixon; Agricultural Economist Tahirou Abdoulaye (center) with colleagues; Dr Elizabeth Parkes, Cassava Breeder, showing off the huge cassava root on display; IITA staff and partners led by DG Sanginga (third from left) with IFAD President Kanayo Nwanze (third from right).

International scientists pitch fund increase for cassava sector

Top international scientists and policymakers have urged African governments to increase public funding for the cassava sector. The scientists made the pitch during the IITA side event titled "Productivity, Processes and People: Adding Value to Cassava" organized by IITA.

The forum, held on 16 July, during the 6th AASW, identified disease control, technology development in cassava processing, and women's participation in cassava research as priorities for boosting the sector's impact on food security in Africa.

"Increasing funding for cassava research and processing across the value chain by including women in decision making roles is necessary for the future of the continent. It contributes to the creation of jobs for the youth, better livelihoods for smallholder farmers, reduction in hunger and poverty, and food security for all," says Dr Elizabeth Parkes, cassava breeder.

Cassava in Africa is threatened by two devastating diseases, Cassava Brown Streak Disease (CBSD) and Cassava Mosaic Disease (CMD), leading to potential losses in food security and livelihoods of 135 million people in East Africa alone, and the 300 million cassava consumers in Africa as a whole.

Both diseases are caused by viruses and transmitted by small insects called whiteflies. The diseases are also spread by stem cuttings taken from infected plants. The international movement of these cuttings is increasing rapidly—within and beyond Africa—the diseases could spread to the rest of Africa and, possibly, the rest of the cassava-producing world.

Proper management of the crisis would allow cassava to develop its full potential for improving food security in Africa, not only as a subsistence crop, but also for generating income. "If Africa takes advantage of cassava and supports favorable policy frameworks and tax policies for the processing and marketing cassava and other crops, then we will more effectively tackle many problems in food security for the continent," Dr Parkes explained.

With the aid of mechanical processing machines, cassava is increasingly being produced and processed as a cash crop for multiple uses beyond the traditional gari and fufu. It also can be used for baking, cereals and snacks, soups, beverage emulsifiers, powdered non-dairy creamers, and confectionery. Cassava starch is also used in the industrial sector, such as in paper manufacturing, cosmetics, and pharmaceuticals.

The development of effective machines and tools at many different scales reduces processing time, labor, and production losses of more than 70% will have a significant impact on women working in the sector. On the other hand, the role of women in decision-making is still lacking much-needed political and research support.

"Targeted policies on credit, gender-sensitive extension services, and technological and institutional changes geared towards women would further advance productivity in this sector. The empowerment of women is the key to success in the cassava economy," says IITA gender expert Dr Holger Kirscht.

IITA staff (below and bottom) Bussie Maziya-Dixon, Peter Kulakow, Elizabeth Parkes, and Richardson Okechukwu, with national and international partners that included Claude Fauquet and Eugene Terry (bottom right) during the side event on adding value to cassava through R4D.

African farmers get new opportunity to increase crop yields

Efforts to transform agriculture in Africa have received a boost as researchers and other partners working under the Support for Agricultural Research and Development of Strategic Crops (SARD-SC) project aim to raise the productivity of maize, cassava, wheat, and rice by 20 percent among target beneficiaries.

The plan is to help reduce the burden of food importation, create and offer farmers more access to markets, improve livelihoods, and address poverty while improving the capacities of beneficiaries to tackle the challenges of development in the region.

About a million farmers will directly benefit from the project which has a basket of innovations, while another million and a half will benefit indirectly with possible spin-off effects on other farmers in other member countries.

"Narrowing the yield gap is key for African farmers, and it will help them to compete globally and to feed themselves," says DG Nteranya Sanginga at the 6th Africa Agriculture Science Week in Accra, Ghana.

Home to vast arable lands, Africa has low agricultural productivity and is characterized by a wide gap between yields from research stations and those on farmers' fields. The low productivity puts farmers in the continent at a disadvantage and consequently subjects the continent to massive importation of food staples.

In 2010, food imports into Africa stood at about $43 billion out of which the continent spent $10.7 billion on wheat, $4 billion on rice, and $3 billion on maize, according to FAO.

Dr Sanginga said that such expenses on food were "unacceptable" for a continent that has the potential to grow enough and feed itself.

"The SARD-SC project would help address some of these food security issues," he added.

Funded by the African Development Bank, SARD-SC aims to push some of the tested innovations to farmers, while at the same time building their knowledge and skills.

"This project will impact positively on the lives of African farmers," says Dr Chrys Akem, Project Coordinator of SARD-SC.

Direct beneficiaries under SARD-SC include farmers in Bénin, Côte d'Ivoire, DR Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Other regional member countries will also benefit.

The project has several components including agricultural technologies and innovations generation, agricultural technologies and innovations dissemination, and sustainable capacity development.

Approved in 2012, the SARD-SC project is a US$63.24 million-funded initiative that is being co-implemented by three Africa-based centers under the CGIAR, namely, IITA, Africa Rice Center, and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas. IITA is also the Executing Agency of the project.

Another CGIAR Center – the International Food Policy Research Institute – a specialized technical agency, will support the other three centers.

Above: The SARD-SC side event was attended by partners and other stakeholders. It featured presentations by the various project implementers from Africa Rice Center, ICARDA, and IITA. Below, right: Project Coordinator Chrys Akem (second from left) and Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist Amadou Isiaka (leftmost) with partners.

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