

ATAC!: New program to transform agriculture in Congo

From 30 May to 10 June, IITA Director General [Nteranya Sanginga](#) embarked on a mission to Brazzaville, during which he engaged with the Head of State of the Republic of Congo, President Denis Sassou Nguesso. He was accompanied by the DRC Country Representative [Zoumana Bamba](#), Head of TAAT Clearing House Mpoko Bokanga, IITA Eastern Africa Director Emeritus [Victor Manyong](#), and TAAT Cassava Value Chain Coordinator [Adebayo Abbas](#).

The mission, a joint venture with the [African Development Bank](#) (AfDB) led by the Director of Agriculture and Agro-Industry Martin Fregene, was to prepare for “Agenda de Transformation de l’Agricole au Congo” (ATAC!), a three-year program initiated by President Nguesso. ATAC! will be supported by the AfDB and other international development partners and aims to directly reach 200,000 producers, including 40% of the country’s farmers.

The accelerated program will cover the production, processing, and marketing value chains of the cassava, rice, maize, livestock, poultry, animal feed, and aquaculture sectors. ATAC! will also facilitate access to agricultural financing for agricultural producers to reduce the importation of products.

President Nguesso applauded the proposed name of the program, ATAC!, and requested the parties



IITA Director General Nteranya Sanginga (left) with DRC Senate President Bahati Lukwebo.

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Policymakers approve Aflasafe testing in Burundi

[IITA](#)-Burundi officially unveiled Aflasafe by presenting two Aflasafe products—Aflasafe BU01, a country-specific product, and Aflasafe KE01, the regional product—for field testing in Burundi. The Institute presented the products to stakeholders at the IITA-Burundi office in April.

The IITA Country Representative, [Emmanuel Njukwe](#), urged national and development partners to adopt practices that minimize aflatoxin contamination, particularly in maize and groundnut.



Participants representing the Ministries and National Institutes during the results-sharing meeting.

Subject matter experts explained the results of the laboratory work on isolating non-toxic *Aspergillus* spp. from Burundi. The products were handed over to the Ministry of Environment, Agriculture, and Livestock, represented by Eliachim Sakayoya.

In attendance were representatives from the Institut des Sciences Agronomiques du Burundi (ISABU), Direction de la Protection des Végétaux (DPV), Organisation Nationale de Contrôle et de Certification des Semences (ONCCS), Centre National de Technologie Alimentaire (CNTA), Projet Régional de Développement Agricole Intégré dans les Grands Lacs (PRDAIGL), Direction Générale de l'Agriculture (DGA), Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, and the IITA-Burundi team.

IITA Pathologist [Joseph Atehnkeng](#) explained that the strains contained in both Aflasafe products are natural and exist in Burundi soils and crops. He further highlighted the development processes of Aflasafe, explaining its composition, distribution within the country, and mode of field application.

The approval to test Aflasafe KE01

follows the East African Community (EAC) policy and guidelines on testing and registration in the region. IITA Principal Scientist (Plant Pathology) and Leader of the Africa-wide Aflasafe Initiative, [Ranjit Bandyopadhyay](#), noted that finding Aflasafe KE01 effective and subsequently registering it in Burundi makes it the first Aflasafe product that can be used in three countries (Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi).

"The launch was done at the right time, given the challenge that aflatoxin is causing in the country," said Sakayoya. CNTA representative Madam Pelagie Nimbona reiterated: "I am honored to participate in this launch, and it was time for the arrival of Aflasafe because a big proportion of maize harvest was going to waste because of aflatoxin."

Aflatoxins are carcinogens that may cause liver cancer, stunted growth in children, and even death in humans. They also impact poultry, increasing mortality and reducing productivity. Aflatoxin contamination also affects trade within and between countries, leading to shipment rejection, the extra cost incurred for testing products, and reduced marketable volumes. IITA,

the US Department of Agriculture–Agricultural Research Service (USDA-ARS), and ISABU, as part of the USAID-funded APPEAR project and World Bank-funded project Régional de Développement Agricole Intégré dans les Grands Lacs (PRDAIGL), developed these products to address these challenges.

Aflasafe is a safe and effective natural product for managing aflatoxin in maize, groundnut, and sorghum value chains in Burundi. The availability of biocontrol technologies for commercial use is critical for Burundians, especially the farming community, as aflatoxins constitute a significant challenge to maize, groundnut, and sorghum production and efforts to secure food supplies and improve the health and well-being of its people.

Adopting Aflasafe in Burundi, combined with other good management practices by farmers, will reduce aflatoxin contamination by over 80% in maize, groundnut, and sorghum. This will increase crop value, improve children's and women's health, ensure food safety in the country, and obtain products that meet export market standards.



Left: Packaged brands of Aflasafe BU01 and KE01. Right: During the unveiling (L-R) Pelagie Nimbona Representative of CNTA; Eliachim Sakayoya, Representative of the Ministry of Environment, Agriculture and Livestock; Emmanuel Njukwe, IITA Country Representative; Joseph Atehnkeng, IITA pathologist; Patrick Mutuo, IITA scientist; and Eric Nijimbere, Technician CNTA.

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to move urgently to be ready for the upcoming planting season that starts in September. The Head of State appreciated IITA for its vast experience around the Continent and welcomed the idea of a Delivery Unit housed in the Presidency to monitor progress closely.

Prime Minister Anatole Collinet Makosso appreciated the inclusion of youth and women as an integral part of the agenda. He acknowledged that the ATAC! agenda is about realizing the dream of the Head of State.

DG Sanginga also visited Kinshasa, DRC, where he met with the Senate President, Mr Bahati Lukwebo. He discussed the vision of the African Agriculture Leadership Institute (AALI), seeking the support and sponsorship of AALI in the DRC by the President, His Excellency Felix Tshisekedi.

ENABLE-TAAT success story: Mentorship helps beneficiary overcome COVID-19 impact

A beneficiary of the ENABLE-TAAT capacity development exercise has affirmed that beyond technical training for youth, mentorship and training in soft skills and business development are valuable to provide a soft landing for new enterprises.



Some TAKERO products, including yam flour, cassava flour, mixed pap, etc.

In 2019, Aderemi Adekunle Oke participated in an aquaculture training provided by an ENABLE-TAAT compact because of the ample opportunities it offered. Before that time, he started a fish enterprise that was swept away during heavy rainfall. So, he decided to gain more knowledge from the ENABLE-TAAT aquaculture training before starting again.

He learned about the fish value chain from production to consumption and business development. He was also trained to set up a business plan, think “outside the box”, manage an enterprise, be proactive, respect human value, and be emotionally intelligent. Oke then ventured into fish production by building a hatchery and six nursery



Left: Mentorship provided a soft landing in agribusiness for Oke. Right: Oke showcasing some of his products.



ponds and a mini pond. He planned to hatch fingerlings and nurture, process, and market them. Sadly, the outbreak of COVID-19 dealt a massive blow to his enterprise. He lost his market, and many fish died due to lack of feed.

In his low moments, he began to reflect on some of the notes taken during the soft skills training and sought mentorship from ENABLE-TAAT staff. He developed an interest in food processing during that time, and the youth compact invited him to the [IITA](#) processing center for orientation.

In 2020, Oke ventured into processing, packaging, and marketing commodities, including potato, cassava flour, maize flour, plantain flour, chili pepper, and locust beans. He developed a business plan with support from the ENABLE-TAAT team, which continued to mentor him, and started a new enterprise named “TAKERO”. The enterprise now employs Oke’s wife and about eight casual staff. It has a large local market and is now exporting to the UAE, UK, USA, and Sweden!

“They provided me a conducive environment and adequate mentorship during my transition. I felt very sad when I lost my fish enterprise to COVID-19, but I am grateful that ENABLE-TAAT helped me gain the orientation I need before launching my new enterprise. I am doing fine now,” he said.

TAKERO is very particular about using first-grade quality materials that meet international standards. The primary commodities they process are pro-vitamin A maize from IITA, millet, orange-fleshed sweet potato (OFSP), yam, cassava, and vegetables.

Banana project applauded for making record progress amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

IITA management and the Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) of the [Accelerated Breeding Better Bananas \(ABBB\)](#) project have praised the project for its solid achievements in improving the production and productivity of banana in Tanzania and Uganda, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Notable achievements include the official release of new banana hybrids of the popular cooking banana ‘matooke’ in Tanzania—the [first-ever hybrids locally bred](#), and the rolling out of the innovative [Banana breeding Tracking Tool \(BTracT\)](#) currently operational across all project breeding sites.

The team reported their achievements during the project’s annual review and planning meeting held virtually on 17-20 May to review progress and results and discuss a way forward as the project transitions into the [Excellence in Breeding \(EiB\)](#) platform under One CGIAR in 2022.

In her opening remarks, [Leena Tripathi](#), IITA Director for Eastern Africa Hub, appreciated the hard work and commended the project on its achievements. These included good collaboration with national partners—the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) and Tanzania Agricultural Research Institute (TARI), which contributed towards improving banana breeding systems and changing the lives of banana farming communities.

“Major achievements of the project include the official release of [NARITA](#) hybrids in Tanzania; development and deployment of the banana tracking tool, which is key for modern banana breeding programs, and efforts in training the next generation of banana breeders, including IITA and partner staff in Uganda and Tanzania as well as several PhD and master’s students,” she said.

The project team and partners

highlighted the results and challenges under the project’s [research themes](#) and future outlook. The themes are pre-breeding, [breeding](#) (divided into two subthemes: Matooke and Mchare), data management, communication and capacity building, and seed delivery/variety release systems.

Highlighting the project’s successes, [Rony Swennen](#), the project coordinator, noted that breeding in the project was currently guided by the product profile for the parents and the final product to ensure it met the consumers’ demands.

“We developed the product profiles together with our colleagues at NARO; however, we still need to work on it further because what we have now was only done by breeders. We need to have the consumers and market intelligence to refine the elements,” Swennen said.

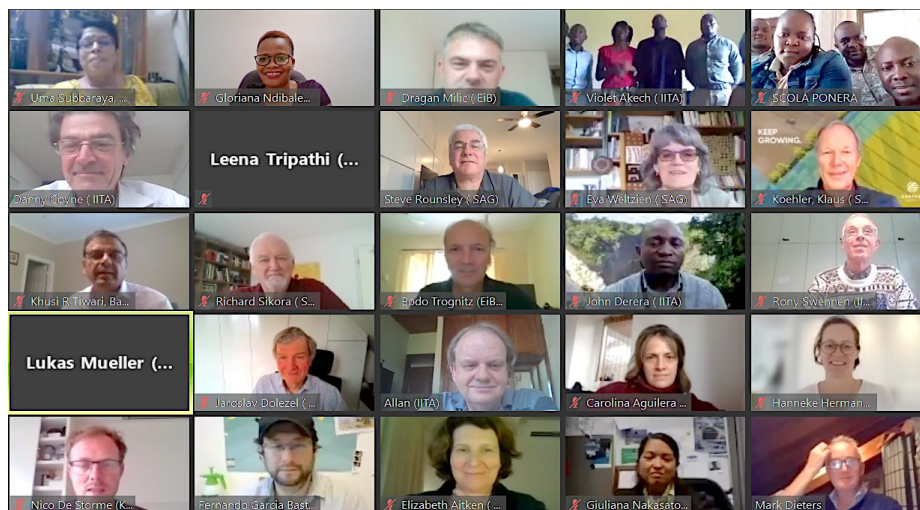
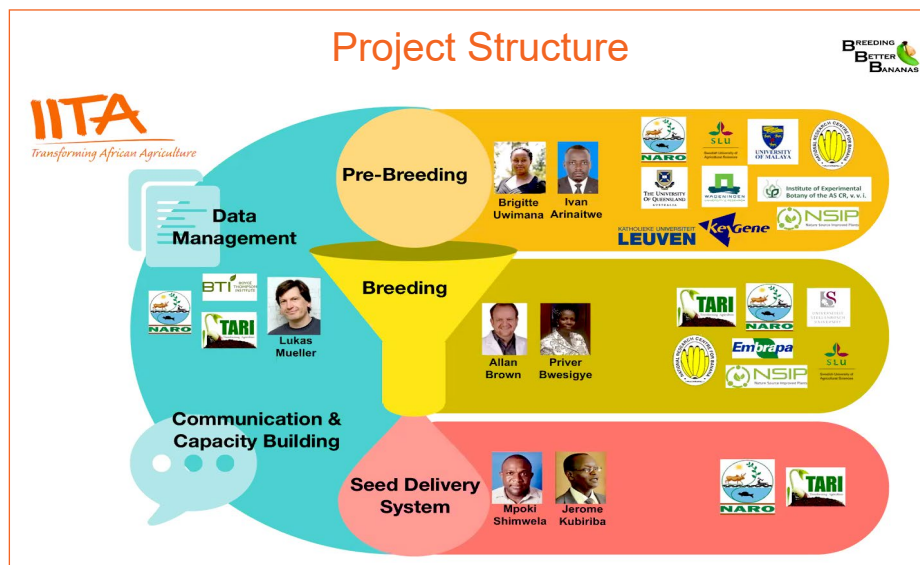
He further noted that the team is linking hybrids with sensory acceptability, an important element to start evaluating for quality. The bases are developed by NARO using the preferred traits with measurements in the laboratory. Furthermore, the first Mchare hybrids have been selected for preliminary yield trials.

Giving their feedback on progress and achievement, [Eva Weltzien-Rattunde](#), SAG member, also commended the good and clear division of roles and responsibilities between the national research institutes and IITA.

“There is good integration of pathology work during pre-breeding and breeding work,” Weltzien-Rattunde said.

The ABBB project seeks to strengthen the banana breeding programs in the two countries towards developing new high-yielding hybrid banana varieties with resistance to key pests and diseases.

The project is the biggest banana breeding project and is led by IITA in cooperation with TARI and NARO and brings together other institutes and banana breeding programs across the globe. There were 125 participants, including other delegates from [Excellence in Breeding](#), the private sector ([Bayer](#), [NSIP](#), [KeyGene](#)), and the NGO, [MEDA](#). This work is part of [the CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Banana, flagship 2](#).



Top: An overview of the research themes and partners under the ABBB project.
Bottom: A group photo of the virtual annual meeting of the ABBB project.