

SCIENCE FORUM SOUTH AFRICA 2024 SIDE EVENT SESSION
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CSIR ICC, Pretoria, South Africa

ACCELERATING FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA: CONVENING THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE – LESSONS FROM SADC COUNTRIES

Event Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On December 2, 2024, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), in collaboration with the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) and the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), hosted a pivotal side event titled "Accelerating Food Systems Transformation in Africa – Lessons from SADC Countries" during the Science Forum South Africa 2024 at CSIR ICC, Pretoria. This event served as a dynamic platform to explore innovative strategies for reshaping Africa's food systems to tackle the continent's critical food insecurity, poverty, and inequality challenges.

The event highlighted the urgent need to address dysfunctional food systems, emphasising inclusivity to ensure that no one is left behind in this transformation. Participants were urged to engage in inclusive co-creation, encouraging stakeholders to collaborate from the initial stages of research agenda development to the application of knowledge products. This approach calls for embracing generational and gender diversity, while harnessing the potential of Africa's youth as a technologically savvy and innovative force.

Discussions also focused on bridging the gap between the aspirations of state and non-state actors, stressing that collaboration should enhance complementarity rather than foster competition. The need to build robust networks was underscored, with an emphasis on breaking down silos, sharing best practices, and addressing persistent partnership disconnects that impede progress in Africa's agricultural and food systems sectors. This event marked a significant step towards fostering a collaborative and inclusive approach to transforming food systems across the continent.

INTRODUCTION

The "Accelerating Food Systems Transformation in Africa: Lessons from SADC Countries" side event, organised by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), and Agricultural Research Council (ARC), was held on 2 December 2024 at the CSIR ICC in Pretoria, South Africa. This session was part of the Science Forum South Africa 2024 and aimed to address the critical challenge of transforming agricultural food systems in Africa towards sustainability and equity.

The event brought together a diverse array of stakeholders, including representatives from government, academia, research councils, civil society organisations, international development agencies, the private sector, farming organisations, the public, and the media. The goal was to explore innovative strategies and practical solutions for food systems transformation across the continent, with a focus on creating sustainable and equitable agricultural practices.

The session underscored the importance of sustainable agricultural practices as a means to reduce poverty and unemployment, while also achieving food and nutrition security in both rural and urban communities. It emphasised the necessity of ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, particularly for smallholder farmers, women, and marginalized communities who are often the backbone of agricultural production in Africa.

Through a series of insightful presentations and dynamic panel discussions, experts shared valuable insights from case studies in SADC countries, including South Africa, Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi. These case studies highlighted successful initiatives and identified key drivers for food systems transformation, offering a wealth of knowledge and experience to inform future efforts.

Key topics covered during the event included the pivotal role of research and development in driving innovation and progress in agriculture. The integration of technology and innovation was highlighted as a crucial factor in enhancing productivity and sustainability. Policy frameworks were discussed as essential tools for creating an enabling environment for transformation, while the integration of traditional knowledge was recognised for its potential to complement modern agricultural practices.

Community-driven approaches were emphasised as vital for ensuring that transformation efforts are inclusive and responsive to the needs of local populations. Multi-stakeholder collaboration was identified as a key strategy for leveraging diverse expertise and resources to achieve common goals.

Cross-cutting themes such as gender, digital transformation, and the scaling of interventions were also addressed, recognising their importance in shaping the future of food systems in Africa. The session provided actionable recommendations for policymakers, development agencies, and practitioners, aiming to foster dialogue and inspire action to ensure a resilient and food-secure future for Africa.

Overall, the event served as a platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration, highlighting the collective efforts needed to accelerate food systems transformation in Africa. By bringing together a wide range of stakeholders, the session aimed to build momentum and drive meaningful change towards a sustainable and equitable agricultural future for the continent.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

In the quest to address the multifaceted challenges facing Africa's food systems, the session discussed a holistic and collaborative approaches to transform food systems in SADC countries.

Role of Research in Addressing Food Systems Challenges

- Drawing experience from ARUA-FSNET initiative, the research institutions and organisations were argued to collaborate with farmers to bridge the gap between science and the community.
- Emphasis was placed on the importance of promoting interdisciplinary networks to enhance science communication and foster collaborative research efforts.
- Researchers are encouraged to unify their voices and contribute to the generation of knowledge through publications, securing funding, and forming strategic collaborations.

Key Pathways for South Africa's Food Systems Transformation

- Food insecurity at the household level remains a significant challenge in South Africa.
- The National Food National Security Plan (NFNSP) 2018-2023 introduced seven strategic objectives to improve food and nutrition security in South Africa.
- In line with UN food systems mandate, the department of agriculture, land reform and rural development adopted four key pathways to transform South Africa food systems:
 1. Enhance sustainable local production of safe, nutritious, and indigenous foods.
 2. Promote social, economic, and environmental resilience.
 3. Facilitate inclusive, sustainable, and competitive value chains.
 4. Promote integrated food systems policies, legislation, planning, and governance.
- It is anticipated that the new food and nutrition security plan will focus on an inclusive food systems approach.

Positioning Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) to Address Food Systems Challenges

- Research and development require a holistic, participatory approach, engaging farmers for context-driven solutions.
- Tailored training and capacity development programs are essential.
- Technology and innovation can address high youth unemployment by creating entrepreneurial opportunities in agricultural sector.

Supporting policy reform and implementation

- Policy interventions should prioritise equitable access to resources, ensuring that both farmers and the private sector are actively involved in decision-making processes. This inclusive approach is essential for driving meaningful transformation within food systems.
- Key policy interventions needed should include:
 - Land reform and tenure improvements.
 - Enhanced access to land for women.
 - Inclusive land policies and equitable distribution among smallholders.
 - Access to finance and market penetration for smallholders.
 - Innovation to boost agricultural production and productivity.

Enhancing Government Support for Smallholder Farmers

- There is a critical need to balance the connection between smallholder farmers and export facilitators to ensure equitable access to international markets.
- Smallholder farmers encounter numerous challenges, including inadequate training opportunities, unfair market practices, a lack of export infrastructure, and insufficient representation in national agricultural priorities.

- The integration of agricultural technology is essential to attract and engage young people in the agricultural sector, fostering innovation and sustainability.
- The adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices is inconsistent across SADC countries, with smallholder farmers facing significant barriers to implementation. Addressing these challenges is vital for promoting inclusive and sustainable food systems.

KEY OUTCOMES AND WAY FORWARD

- Participants were reminded that “science is not an end in itself.” Science must inform policy, practice, and decision-making, applying a nexus approach to tackle interconnected challenges which are complex. To drive this point home, a crucial question for reflection was proposed: “Whose research agenda are we working on or towards?” This question challenges us to align our efforts with the priorities and aspirations of African communities. This requires transdisciplinary, participatory and bottom-up approaches.
- The discussions also highlighted the importance of scaling research innovations effectively beyond ‘proof of concept’. Scaling must go beyond expanding successful pilot projects geographically (scaling out) to embedding them within institutional frameworks (scaling up) and fostering deep cultural and behavioral shifts (scaling deep) for lasting impact. Furthermore, the session called for targeted policy interventions backed by dedicated budgets to ensure implementation. Without resources, policies risk remaining aspirations rather than actions.
- Another critical area is capacity building, particularly the need for governments to prioritise investment in research and development (R&D). Strengthening the capacity of institutions and individuals is essential for innovation and long-term transformation of food systems. At the same time, the current extension and advisory service models need to be reevaluated to better serve smallholder farmers, integrating modern agricultural practices and community-driven approaches.
- However, achieving these goals requires rethinking funding mechanisms. Over-reliance on donor funding often means that external entities dictate research agendas, potentially misaligning them with Africa’s unique priorities. The session call for a more self-reliant approach, where funding mechanisms empower African stakeholders to shape the research and policy landscape. To support this shift, the development of advisory notes to governments and other actors, providing practical and transformative recommendations to align funding and policy priorities with the continent’s needs was proposed.
- The event underscored the importance of collaboration, monitoring, evaluation and learning, innovation, and action. By building strong networks, prioritising inclusive policies, and committing to impactful research, we can create food systems that are resilient, equitable, and sustainable. Together, we can drive the transformation needed to secure Africa’s future.
- Transforming Africa’s food systems is a complex and multifaceted challenge that involves various stakeholders, including governments, local communities, farmers, businesses, and international organizations. The goal is to create a sustainable and equitable food system that can provide nutritious food for all, while also supporting economic growth and environmental health.

