



A Plan for U.S. Leadership in International Agricultural Development

**Strengthening Global Food Security with Strategic
Focus, Proven Solutions, and Cost Efficiency**



February 26, 2026



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The Food Security Leadership Council (FSLC) believes the United States, in partnership with other countries, can strengthen food security around the world through visionary leadership – and that doing so advances both our core values and our core interests. FSLC is developing a Blueprint for U.S. Leadership in Global Food Security that will detail the most strategic, evidence-based, and highest impact steps that the U.S. government can take to move the needle on global hunger. It will recommend actions across six integrated policy pathways: international development, humanitarian assistance, trade, food and agricultural innovation, public data, and multilateral engagement. Here, we propose a new U.S. approach to international agricultural development.

Key Points

U.S. investments in international agricultural development should be sharply focused on driving sustainable productivity growth in key agricultural zones.

- Accelerating sustainable productivity growth in high-potential geographic areas can spur broad-based economic growth, lift more people out of poverty, and improve food and nutrition security—all in the strategic and humanitarian interest of the United States. It also can create markets for American companies and farmers, increasing trade opportunities.
- We should hold ourselves accountable and strive to achieve an average annual total factor productivity growth rate of at least 3% to strengthen output, resilience, and incomes over time.
- To drive this growth, the United States should invest in productivity- and sustainability-enhancing **agricultural innovations**—developing them, making them accessible, and deliberately expanding their adoption. This focus leverages longstanding U.S. leadership in agriculture and innovation.

Three interdependent and mutually-reinforcing lines of effort underpin the strategy:

- **Innovation at Scale:** Developing and promoting large-scale uptake of innovations that enable sustainable productivity gains.
- **Strategic Policy Reform:** Promoting a core agenda of policy reforms that enable sustainable productivity gains and strong markets.
- **Shared Expertise:** Mobilizing U.S. public and private scientific and agricultural expertise in partnership with international talent and resources to advance shared food security goals.

This forms the basis of a systemic approach, intended to be self-sustaining and self-scaling over time.

What's In It for the United States?

This approach offers strategic focus, cost efficiencies, and overall cost savings. It deliberately targets the most foundational challenge of global food security, zeroes in on high-potential regions, and enables politically-informed, long-term engagement with key governments that can benefit the United States' broader foreign policy agenda. It adopts an integrated approach through a mechanism that minimizes government overhead, facilitates burden-sharing with other donors, and leverages the full diplomatic toolset of the U.S. government. It puts the United States back in the lead in an area of immense geopolitical importance. Through its enhanced focused and streamlined operations, it offers the possibility of significant cost-savings as compared to past approaches, both in program dollars and overhead.

Lessons Learned



Past U.S. investments in international agricultural development have unquestionably improved the lives of many and demonstrated the goodwill of the American people to communities around the world. But in recent years they have fallen short of bringing about substantial and sustainable improvements in food security. As we develop a new approach, we must avoid the shortcomings of the past:

- **Limited strategic direction**, in which investments pursue many indirect pathways toward disparate opportunities, without realistic prioritization.
- **Loss of evidence-based decision making**, in which activities are not directly tied to a proven development pathway.
- **Geographic dilution**, in which U.S. investments are spread across too many countries, failing to achieve a critical mass in any. For example, in recent years, less than half of available funding was dedicated to the 20 identified “target” countries— a list that expanded with no increase in resources.
- **Program fragmentation**, in which limited resources are spread across too many uncoordinated projects, often acting in isolation from one another in support of too many disparate goals.
- **High overhead costs**, in which ballooning reporting and approval requirements and consensus-driven decision making drive up overhead, hinder the speed and impact of investments, and limit localization efforts.
- **Disconnect with diplomatic efforts**, in which broader foreign policy objectives are discounted in development decision making and the full range of diplomatic tools is not brought to bear to achieve global food security goals.
- **Over-reliance on program branding**, in which U.S. investments in international agricultural development risk becoming too associated with an Administration’s policies and ideologies, rather than a deeply institutionalized element of U.S. international engagement over the long term.
- **Addiction to short-term responses**, in which U.S. planners lack the strategic discipline and political cover to invest in longer-term, higher-impact outcomes, and instead resort to short-term fixes that do not endure.
- **Overreliance on pure grant programming**, when blended models (e.g., a combination of grants, loans, and fee-driven models) can offer a more cost-effective approach that requires local buy-in and has a clearer path to self-sustainability.

We need a new strategy and a new approach.

A New Strategic Focus

U.S. investments in international agricultural development should henceforth prioritize systemic interventions that drive **sustainable productivity growth in key agricultural zones**. Through a sharp focus on sustainable productivity, we can spur broad-based economic growth, lift more people out of poverty, and improve food and nutrition security. In doing so, we create markets for American companies and farmers, increasing trade opportunities. Inaction carries significant risk. In countries facing pronounced food insecurity, poverty, and population growth, static agricultural productivity and declining per capita food supplies will undermine all aspects of development and security.

Globally, most food is consumed close to where it is produced; in developing countries, the question of whether enough food exists is often a local one. Because of this, accelerating agricultural productivity growth is especially critical in regions where food demand is rising fastest—most notably, sub-Saharan Africa.

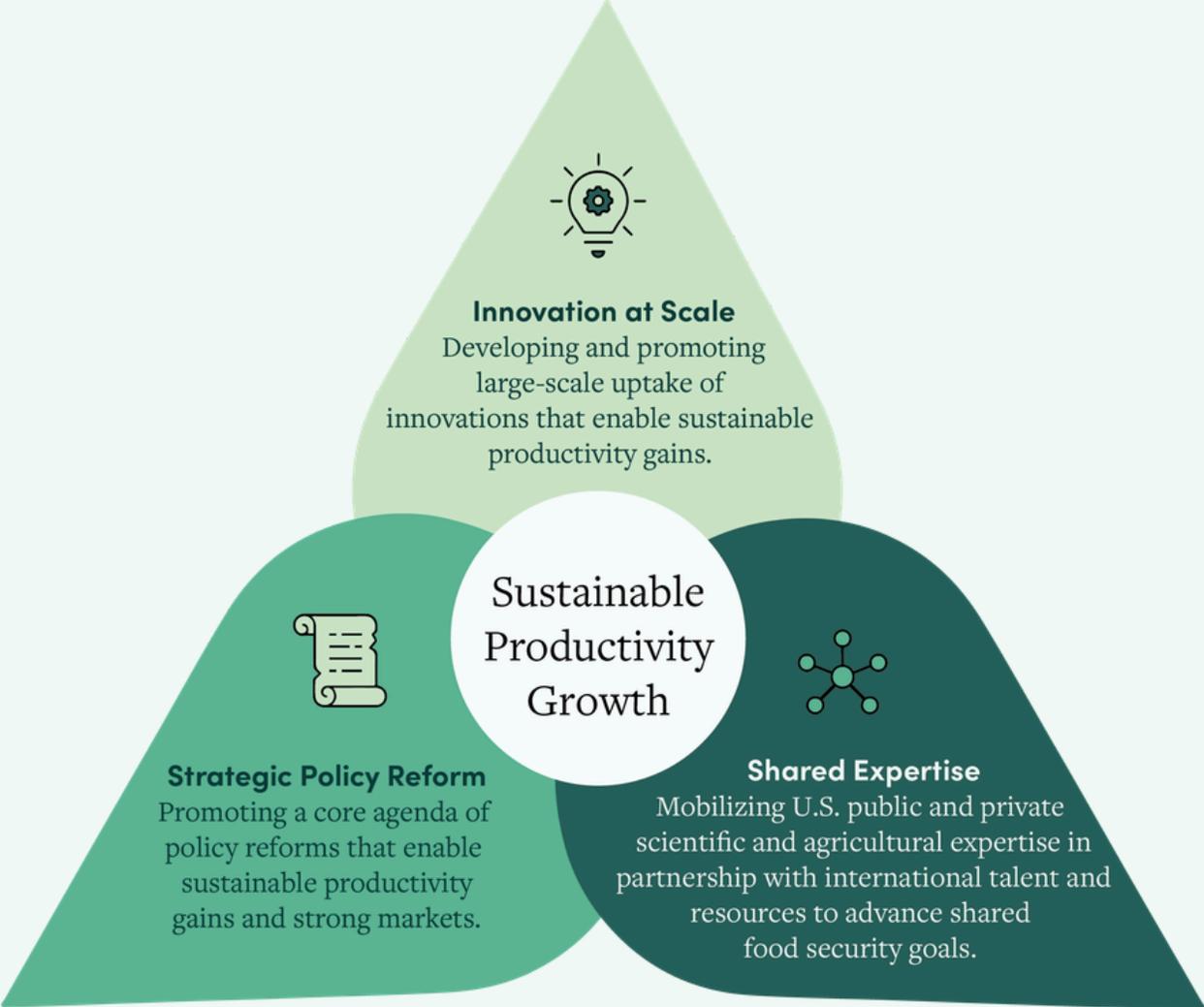
Our overarching objective therefore must be to accelerate sustainable productivity growth in key agricultural zones across low- and low-middle income countries. This means that, year after year, these regions must produce more food from a given set of resources such as land, labor, capital, and other inputs, while safeguarding environmental and social sustainability. We must hold everyone involved accountable to this goal and strive for an annual total factor productivity growth rate of no less than 3 percent.

Productivity gains do more than increase food supply. They lower food prices, raise wages, and free up labor, generating more disposable household income. This has widespread benefits for the community and broader economy, including creating employment opportunities and improving children's nutritional outcomes. For these reasons, agricultural productivity gains are generally two to three times more effective in reducing poverty in developing countries than gains in industry or services.

Key agricultural zones are potential food baskets— major farming systems with the highest long-term production potential for a given region. They share agroecological conditions and a commodity set and often span country borders. With strategic investments, these regions can be the foundation for sustained growth in food and nutrition security. This enables:

- Economies of scale in developing agricultural innovations that are appropriate across entire transnational areas, with positive spillover effects beyond the areas of direct intervention.
- Economies of scale in staffing and program management.
- Diplomatic advantages in encouraging common action by governments across the region.
- Flexibility to prioritize collaboration with countries exhibiting the greatest political will and potential for impact, with appropriate weight given to diplomatic interests.

A Three-Part Plan



Three mutually-reinforcing lines of effort underpin this systemic approach, intended to become self-sustaining and self-scaling. Over time, the approach will become self-sustaining by promoting access to innovations, empowering the local private sector to expand access to them, and promoting the market dynamics that will maintain their availability into the future. It will become self-scaling by creating a regulatory environment that enables transformations and by promoting “spill-over” into neighboring areas, as businesses grow and farmers and businesses learn from each other’s successes. It is also designed to easily incorporate and leverage the contributions of like-minded partners.

1. Innovation at Scale: developing and expanding uptake of agricultural innovations

U.S. development investments should maintain a strategic focus on accelerating sustainable productivity gains through the promotion of innovations tailored to each key agricultural zone. This focus capitalizes on the United States' comparative advantage in agricultural innovation, backed by the deep expertise of the U.S. innovation community. The approach will depend on the following elements.

A. Promoting diverse production systems: The effort in each agricultural zone will seek to accelerate sustainable productivity for a mixed set of agricultural commodities that can provide not just caloric sufficiency and profitability, but also nutritional security.

B. Advancing suites of innovations: For each zone, the program will enable the development, delivery, and scaling of tailored menus of innovations that are appropriate for a range of types of farmers in the zone. Innovations can be policies, products, practices, or technologies that, if adopted, enhance sustainable productivity. They may be new or old, high-tech or low-tech. The options will aim to improve all essential aspects of the system, from soil and water management, to crop selection, to storage, processing, distribution, and marketing.

C. Promoting innovations from farms to markets: The program will foster businesses along the agricultural supply chain for the purpose of expanding the adoption of agricultural innovations. It will promote demand for high-impact innovations and strengthen private business' ability to provide those innovations on a commercially viable and scalable basis. The program should pursue commercial, rather than purely grant-based, approaches wherever possible—such as by selling inputs to farmers and strengthening private sector suppliers. This requires two lines of effort:

- **Building a field-driven innovation network.** The program should foster a network of farmers, input providers, and researchers who mutually inform each other's work and push each other to innovate more effectively. This means researchers who are more responsive to farmers' and input providers' realities, and farmers and suppliers who are more willing to test out new innovations. Collaboratively, this network will 1) identify and evolve suites of existing innovations to promote; and 2) identify gaps for the research community to address. As demand—among farmers and consumers—is critical to the investment's long-term economic sustainability, the primary drivers of this network must be within the communities they are serving.

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- **Setting the market conditions to buttress innovation-driven agriculture.** Using proven approaches common across the developed and developing world, the program should:
 - **Incentivize uptake of new innovations**—e.g., by providing concessionary terms for new products.
 - **Foster key private sector intermediaries where needed**, such as input suppliers, processors, and distributors—e.g., by offering catalytic grants to small businesses to expand their capacity, or technical assistance programs to resolve policy constraints and practical challenges.
 - **Aggregate farmers to enhance their access to key inputs and buyers**—e.g., by investing in enterprises that facilitate bulk purchases or offer bundled service delivery.
 - **Increase demand among farmers and consumers for new products and practices**—e.g., by engaging in mass media campaigns and educational efforts to raise awareness among farmers about key practices or galvanize interest in the public for nutritious foods.

D. Promoting strategic coherence and efficiency through consortia: The United States should select a consortium to orchestrate implementation in each key agricultural zone. This will enable the integration of interventions across a given zone, as no single implementer can effectively do everything. This approach serves to:

- promote integration of existing efforts by multiple actors while maximizing each implementer’s respective core competencies and networks;
- facilitate a coherent implementation strategy for a given zone; and
- minimize the U.S. government’s direct program management responsibilities, reducing what otherwise could have been scores of disparate contracts.

The United States should select the consortium based on the combined abilities of the members and the lead’s 1) capacity to coordinate and empower an effective network of experienced implementation partners; 2) ability to design and ensure an integrated innovation-driven, scalable approach; 3) ability to maximize reach across farmers and supplier networks; and 4) willingness to minimize overhead and take advantage of members’ existing approaches rather than constructing new ones. The consortium lead should be a non-government, non-profit organization.

This strategy is modelled on a particularly successful approach piloted by USAID in Africa in recent years. It capitalizes on those lessons learned, while moving away from the more fragmented, single-issue and single-community projects that had become common.

E. Local Ownership: To scale and sustain any investment, local leadership—government and non-government—must be empowered. Given the emphasis on adoption and scaling, the consortium should center and purposefully prioritize funding to local, regional and national actors with an established track record of direct service delivery. We would expect that 70 percent or more of funding would pass to such organizations, with the relative responsibility of local actors increasing over the course of the program.

The Role of International Agricultural Research Centers in Innovation-Led Development

To ensure that investments are grounded in innovations that drive sustainable productivity growth, international agricultural research centers should be major players in each consortium. Such centers offer deep expertise in enhancing agricultural productivity and strong local and regional ties. As public international organizations, they also offer operational benefits:

- An avenue for expedited contracting, which eliminates the need for years-long, resource-intensive contracting processes while enabling more flexible partnerships with local organizations.
- Strong governance and accountability practices, eliminating the need for extensive program management by the U.S. government or costly engagements with for-profit development implementers. The United States could replace large bureaucracies of contracting and M&E officers with an agile strategic planning and oversight body.
- A clear and established pathway for the United States to leverage its own contributions to crowd in funding from other donors, public and private.
- A pathway to greater reliance on local partners, as the center's contracting mechanisms and on-the-ground presence may be more suited to local engagement than the U.S. system.

Bringing these international organizations together with local partners and last-mile delivery organizations does not transform research organizations into development organizations. Instead, it ensures that:

- Interventions are focused on innovations which are inherently scalable and self-sustaining.
- Research is grounded in the needs of the communities for which it is intended.
- The entire pipeline from research to delivery is focused on results.
- Feedback mechanisms are structurally embedded in the overall effort.



F. Partner Government Buy-In: The U.S. Government should accompany each program with a co-developed and detailed-but-flexible country plan that the partner government formally endorses. This will help ensure that these investments align with and accelerate partner governments' own agricultural development efforts and are backed by strong national political will. Each plan should articulate specific intended outcomes and identify government and implementer roles and responsibilities. It should also specify any government actions that are essential to the program's success and indicate whether continued assistance will depend on their implementation. Where countries have laws, regulations, and policies that will undermine the achievement of goals of a joint program and are unwilling to transition to more conducive policies, the U.S. should consider disengagement.

G. Long-term Focus and Commitment: The United States should commit, to the extent possible, to a decade-long program in each priority agricultural zone. We must avoid the illusion that three-year investments can generate lasting development outcomes; experience shows that they generate only ephemeral fixes and disillusionment.

2. Strategic Policy Reform: promoting a core policy agenda that enables sustainable productivity gains and strong markets

The United States should promote systemic change by working with partner governments to reform key public policies. The State Department—leveraging technical expertise across the U.S. government—should establish a Global Agricultural Policy Strategy outlining universal policy objectives with the greatest potential to strengthen global food security.

Global policy objectives could include fostering new markets for nutritious commodity crops, incentivizing practices that enable sustainable productivity growth, reducing barriers to innovation, facilitating women farmers' access to services, and encouraging national investment in research and extension.

Based on this unified strategy, State should then identify concrete policy objectives for specific partner countries, such as the adoption of specific legislative or regulatory reforms, to promote through diplomacy and technical assistance. The State Department should develop and lead whole-of-government campaigns, coordinated with like-minded international partners, to advocate for and enable the policies' adoption.

In recent years, U.S. efforts to influence partners' policy environments have been a niche activity spread across sometimes vague social and technical objectives and disjointed from broader diplomatic efforts. The U.S. government often did not identify a concrete policy outcome or solution but rather advocated for generalized themes. Further, it often did not seek to integrate policy goals into the full breadth of U.S. government engagement with the partner government, leaving it at best as a low-priority, purely technical topic of engagement.



3. Shared Expertise: collaboratively addressing shared global challenges

U.S. agricultural expertise—found in the land grant and broader university system as well as in the private sector—is one of our biggest assets. It should be brought center stage to address global challenges such as combatting emerging pests and disease and adapting farming systems to the changing climate. The best way to do this is in partnerships. This means proactively supporting capacity building and collaboration with research institutions in developing countries. It also means strengthening our own capacity. As numerous studies have shown, U.S. investment in agricultural research aimed at helping low-income countries has a large positive return for U.S. agriculture and farmers. But we don't profit from this unless we invest in our own ag R&D system.

We should therefore expand the Innovation Lab model. Innovation Labs are U.S. university-led global research hubs that partner U.S. research teams with international research institutions to tackle specific problems that could affect the global food supply. They draw on the expertise and experiences of all the partner institutions, including USDA, and offer U.S. researchers an opportunity to anticipate and prepare for future challenges to U.S. agriculture and train in new and challenging contexts. At the same time, they build the capacity of research institutions in developing countries, accelerating their ability to contribute to shared agricultural challenges.

The United States should identify and prioritize specific agricultural challenges faced in the key agricultural zones that require novel solutions. Organizing around each specific agricultural challenge, Innovation Labs should support 1) coordinated research programs involving partnerships with relevant national, regional, and international agricultural research institutions and members of the U.S. private sector; 2) institutional capacity building within those national or regional organizations; and 3) international study programs facilitating graduate and post-graduate work by students from the key agricultural zones.

To align with the regional Innovation at Scale efforts and to ensure that investments have time to reach fruition, Innovation Lab programs should be established for an initial ten-year period, with options to extend for additional 5-year increments.

Exit Strategy

We must accept that development is slower than we want it to be. Planning for long-term investment is more effective than a series of annually-renewed short-term projects. Further, to garner support for real local ownership and investment, we must demonstrate seriousness of purpose—which means partnering in a reliable, long-term way.

For these reasons, we propose initial **ten-year programs of investments** in each priority agricultural zone, with a deliberate program to increase local ownership, leadership, and responsibility over the course of that period.

At year 8, the United States and the relevant national governments should assess the returns on investment of the program and, if warranted, begin negotiation to continue collaboration for a five-year period on an appropriate cost-sharing basis.

If the program is renewed, the United States may reassess at year 14 and again negotiate to continue collaboration for a five-year period on an appropriate—increasingly weighted toward the national government—cost-sharing basis.

We do not propose formulaic reliance on pre-set criteria or pre-set terms. Such criteria too easily distort incentives and neglect to account for the complexity of national circumstances and the many different types of benefits that arise from international development partnerships.

We must also accept that there will always be a place for international collaboration in agricultural innovation—both development and adoption. Challenges and goals are shared and solutions and opportunities are not constrained by national boundaries, even as local circumstances vary. Countries learn from each other's experiences and achieve more in collaboratively tackling emerging challenges.



What's in it for the United States?

This approach offers strategic focus, cost efficiencies, and overall cost savings. It deliberately targets the most foundational challenge of global food security, zeroes in on high-potential regions, and enables politically-informed, long-term engagement with key governments that can benefit the United States' broader foreign policy agenda. It adopts an integrated approach through a mechanism that minimizes government overhead, facilitates burden-sharing with other donors, and leverages the full diplomatic toolset of the U.S. government. It puts the U.S. back in the lead in an area of immense geopolitical importance. Through its enhanced focused and streamlined operations, it offers the possibility of significant cost-savings as compared to past approaches, both in program dollars and overhead.

The overriding goal of the United States in engaging in global food security work, however, is to be effective. For the reasons outlined above, there is substantial room for improvement over past U.S. practices. The approach proposed here is informed by experience, both positive and negative. We believe it will substantially improve food security, have lasting effect, and bring benefits – economic and diplomatic – to the United States.

