



The United States Cannot Forget About Africa When Investing in International Agricultural R&D

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Africa will play a major role in the future of the global food system. Continued research partnerships between U.S. and African institutions can help accelerate sustainable agricultural productivity growth across the continent and around the world—strengthening global food security and driving economic growth.

Investments in international agricultural R&D provide significant returns and lead to improvements in overall human health, dietary quality and diversification, and environmental impacts, particularly in the most vulnerable populations across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Innovation Labs are a critical channel for U.S. investments in international agricultural R&D. They are U.S. university-led global research hubs that couple U.S. research teams with international research partners to tackle specific problems that could affect the global food supply. In their various forms, they have been a key element of U.S. international agricultural engagement for decades.

As the State Department explores launching new Innovation Labs after halting them a year ago with the dismantling of USAID, it must not neglect Africa.

Investing in R&D in countries across key agricultural zones in Sub-Saharan Africa should be one of the priority considerations for Innovation Labs.

- **It will have the greatest impact.** Africa is home to the largest numbers of food insecure people and faces the largest humanitarian needs. Roughly 20 percent of the African population experiences hunger, compared to 6.7 and 5.1 percent in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, respectively. At the same time, agriculture is a large portion of Africa's overall economy, with significant untapped potential for productivity growth. Investing in research partnerships in Africa aimed at improving sustainable productivity growth can lead to agriculture-led economic growth that drives development and prosperity.
- **It offers direct strategic benefits to the United States.** Research partnerships are a concrete and enduring means of building U.S. influence in the face of mounting geostrategic competition on the continent. They also strengthen ties in Africa's rapidly growing food and agricultural sector, which can set the conditions for U.S. businesses to expand their access to the world's fastest growing market.
- **It helps future-proof agriculture.** Africa's diverse agroecologies and climate-stressed systems offer unmatched conditions to develop and test innovations. Building and maintaining research network relationships underpins U.S. preparedness and competitiveness for current and future food security challenges.

There are strategic advantages of investing in Africa, and significant negatives now and into the future if we exclude the region.

Reducing the Need for Humanitarian Assistance Through Economic Growth Driven by Agricultural R&D

In short: Investing in international agricultural R&D and strengthening local research capacity across Africa can lead to economic growth that enables resilience against food security threats, leading to lower humanitarian assistance needs in the future.

Agriculture-led economic growth is significantly more effective at reducing poverty than growth in other sectors, which can improve rates of food security. For low-income countries, this may be up to 4 times more effective. Agricultural R&D investments, including the Innovation Labs, contribute directly to this dynamic by developing higher-yielding, climate-resilient crops, improving livestock productivity, and strengthening market systems (Box 1). This, in turn, raises farm incomes and increases food availability. As productivity rises, countries become less dependent on food imports and emergency aid.

Agricultural R&D investments are becoming even more critical as conflict and climate change intensify food crises across Africa. Many countries with the highest levels of humanitarian need are also those most exposed to climate shocks and instability, where droughts, floods, and conflict disrupt production and drive repeated emergency responses.

Box 1: Opportunity in Addressing Total Factor Productivity (TFP) Gains

TFP measures how efficiently inputs like land, labor, feed, and seed can be converted into agricultural commodities like crops, livestock, and aquaculture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, productivity gains are sluggish and are primarily driven by land expansion and input intensification. This is compared to Asia, where countries have made big investments in their public agricultural R&D and are seeing TFP growth close to the 2 percent target (averaging 1.9 percent TFP growth annually). U.S. investments in international agricultural R&D, coupled with capacity development, has the potential to accelerate progress across Africa.





Expanding U.S. Markets in Africa

In short: International agricultural R&D investments are forward-looking and position U.S. businesses to compete in one of the fastest growing economical regions while reinforcing mutual benefits in trade.

Investing in agricultural R&D in Africa is one strategic pathway to expanding U.S. markets and strengthening long-term trade relationships. Africa's food and agriculture sector is aiming to reach \$1 trillion by 2030, driven largely by population growth, urbanization, and rising demand for higher-value foods. As this potential is realized it creates an opportunity for U.S. exporters of agricultural products such as seeds, machinery, digital tools, and food products. Innovation Labs can play a catalytic role in shaping these markets by developing locally adapted crop varieties, improving post-harvest systems, and strengthening value chains. This, in turn, increases farmer productivity and income, leading to demand for higher-quality products that can be produced by U.S. companies. Additionally, research partnerships can help to align standards, regulatory systems, and production practices that can help lower the barriers to trade and facilitate commercial ties.

These dynamics have tangible benefits for the United State economy (Box 2). By fostering economic growth and resilience in the African food system, agricultural R&D help create stable trading partners with increasing purchasing power.

Box 2: U.S. University-led International Agricultural Research has High Return on our Investment

U.S. university-led international agricultural research has been a wise investment in taxpayers' money. Over the past 40 years, the United States has seen over an 8:1 economic return on our investments. Outside of the direct economic benefits, the Innovation Labs and their predecessors provided improvements in overall human health, dietary quality and diversification, and environmental impacts across the globe. We also know that international agricultural research has generated spillovers benefiting U.S. producers, including pest resistance and drought tolerance research later adopted domestically. Investing in Sub-Saharan Africa promises to continue this trend of benefits both internationally and domestically.

Building U.S. Influence on the Continent

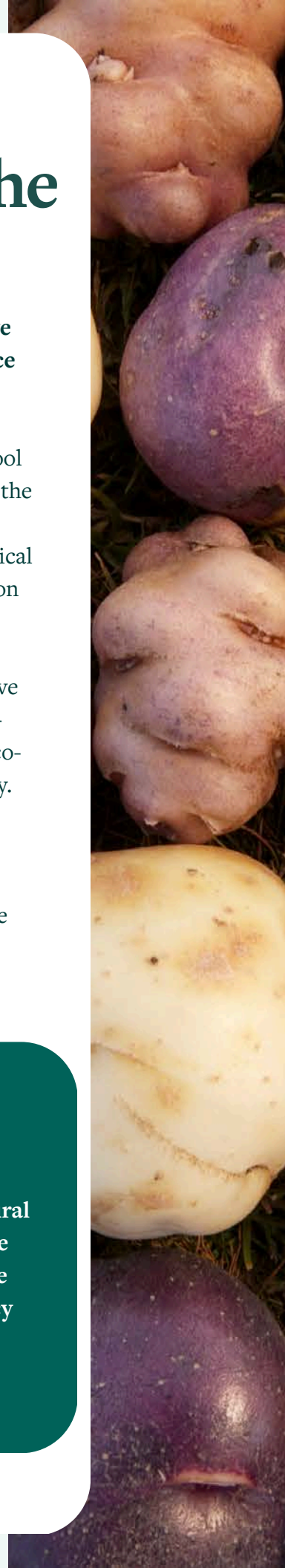
In short: Sustained investments in agricultural R&D in Africa is a cost-effective means of advancing U.S. strategic interests and aids in countering the influence of competing nations in the region.

Investing in agricultural R&D in Africa through the Innovation Labs is a strategic tool for building U.S. influence in the face of growing influence of competing powers in the region. China alone has become the largest trader partner across the continent through initiatives such as Belt and Road. These efforts are part of a larger geopolitical strategy to build long-term influence, secure supply chains, and shape agricultural on the continent.

In this context, U.S. investments in agriculture R&D partnerships offer a competitive alternative. Unlike infrastructure-heavy models, Innovation Labs aim to build long-term scientific collaborations, build local research and development capacity, and co-develop technologies to improve the African food system and increase food security. Creating a network of researchers, policymakers, and private-sector partners that exemplify U.S. research and innovation principles strengthens U.S. influence and increases economic ties (Box 3). These partnerships also help shape emerging agricultural markets and regulatory environments in a way that facilitates U.S. trade and investments.

Box 3: International Training and U.S. Influence

Innovation Labs and their predecessors have supported training for thousands of graduate students, technicians, and extension experts fostering long-term agricultural research skills and building institutional research capacity. Trainees help to manage and scale innovations that are responsive to the local context. They also become the next generation of leadership who align with the United States on science and policy values and support long-term, impactful collaborations.



Africa as a Window into Future Agricultural Challenges

In short: Agricultural research investments in Africa can help future-proof U.S. agriculture and ensures global food security and stability in the face of accelerating climate and biological risks. Africa will play a major role in the future of the global food system. Continued research partnerships are essential to ensuring farmers across the continent can produce more food sustainably.

Africa can serve as a critical window into future challenges that will face global agriculture. The continent's diverse agroecologies, high climate variability, and prevalence of heat and drought provide real-world conditions that mirror the stresses increasingly facing the United States agricultural system.

Research conducted in Africa allows scientists to test crops, livestock systems, and management practices under conditions that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere, which can generate innovations like drought tolerance, pest resistance, and soil management practices that have global applications. Africa is also the center of important genetic diversity in key crops like sorghum and millet, which can underpin breeding efforts worldwide.

As climate change expands the range of pests and disease, research on management in the region will be essential for surveillance, early detection, and mitigation, ultimately leading to better biosafety for the United State and the global community.

Without engagement in Africa, the United States will lose access to these testing grounds, germplasm resources, and collaborative research networks, weakening our ability to respond to emerging agricultural threats and challenges at home. We will also miss out on building and fostering scientific leadership through partnerships, which will be required to address the global food security needs of the future.

Read more about the broader call for U.S. investments in the African Food and Nutrition Security [here](#).