

Thematic session on “Research and innovation for smarter policies and technologies”

Concept note

Context

Smart policies and technologies - intended as innovative tools and approaches to improve resilience and sustainability of agri-food systems - are key to achieve the objectives of the AU and EU green agendas¹.

Since 2016, under the long-term partnership on Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (FNSSA), the AU and the EU have built the foundations of an enabling research and innovation ecosystem that fosters the development and adoption of smart policies and technologies for sustainable agriculture and food security and nutrition.

The FNSSA **International Research Consortium** (FNSSA IRC) set up with the Horizon 2020 project “LEAP4FNSSA”, the Pan African Network for Economic Analysis of Policies (**PANAP**), the Policy and Regulation Initiative for Digital Africa (**PRIDA**), the **DeSIRA** initiative and **over 450 FNSSA projects** supported both by the AU and the EU are key building blocks of the rising AU-EU agricultural knowledge and innovation system. A strategic consolidation of this platform is fundamental for enhanced and long-term impact.

Smart policies in agriculture and food systems rely on innovative approaches to research and innovation, such as inter and transdisciplinary collaborative research, diverse forms of innovation, multi-actor and systemic approaches. **Living labs** and **lighthouses** are places for testing, demonstration and scale up innovation and are used in particular for agroecological practices, soil management, and food systems transformation. These innovative approaches are being tested also in the framework of targeted Africa-Europe cooperation under Horizon Europe.

Well-functioning **Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems** are a precondition for R&I to develop innovative solutions specifically tailored to address the users’ needs, including small-scale farmers and downstream agri-food businesses. Tailor-made approaches and smart technologies enable farmers, SMEs, citizens and policy makers to put in place sustainable and resilient agri-food systems and support agri-food systems transitions.

¹ “Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want” and the “European Green Deal”.

The **4th AU-EU Agriculture Ministerial Conference** pointed out soil health as a priority area of opportunity for sustainable development in the agri-food sector. This is currently being assessed by the European Commission Joint Research Centre through the H2020 Soils4Africa Project and by the PRIMA Programme.

The **Africa Fertilizer and Soil Health Summit** scheduled in July 2023 at the AU Commission's initiative, highlights the momentum to address challenges and opportunities for primary soil health on the continent.

Several projects and initiatives promoting soil-related smart policies, approaches and technologies provide useful insights for future AU-EU cooperation in this priority area. Future Africa-Europe targeted cooperation initiatives under the **EU Mission "a Soil deal for Europe"** are under preparation.

The **FNSSA IRC** – as platform for the AU-EU Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System and **Soil Health** – as a research and innovation priority area for smart policies and technologies emerge as the two main discussion blocks of this high-level panel.

Objective and outcomes

The presentations and panel discussions aim at:

1. Exploring how existing AU-EU cooperation platforms may be supported and upscaled to set up a well-functioning, long-lasting **AU-EU Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System** fostering smart policies, capacities strengthening, reduction in knowledge gaps and innovative technologies.
2. Gathering policy guidance and expert advice as regards future R&I activities reflecting the importance of **Soil Health** for African agri-food systems, rural populations and climate.
3. Identifying **which smart policies and technologies, and data-driven digital solutions**, can best contribute to enabling policies, fostering innovation and valorising digitalisation, considering the need to adopt a systems approach to address the complexity of the green transition in both Africa and Europe.
4. Highlighting the most prominent AU-EU relevant policy initiatives, in particular the (newly adopted by then) **AU-EU Innovation Agenda** and the **AU draft Digital Transformation Strategy for Agriculture**, developed with EU support in the context of PRIDA and to be adopted at the AU Specialised Technical Committee scheduled in late 2023.

The expected outcome is the consolidation of a long-term open platform made of a multi-sectorial and multi-stakeholder community of research organisations, funders, policy makers, private sector, and civil society organisations that strive to work for Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (FNSSA) and a wider support to joint soil health initiatives.

Proposed format

The session is organised in two discussion blocks of 45 minutes, each including a keynote framing presentation and Q&A with the audience. The first discussion block will focus on the FNSSA International Research Consortium as a platform for the AU-EU Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System. The second block, dedicated to AU-EU cooperation on Soil Health, will be followed by a wrap up session harvesting the panel's key messages for the plenary session.

Panellists

Chair

- Martin Heydon, Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Ireland

Moderator

- Kerstin Rosenow, Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Agriculture & Rural Development, European Commission

Speakers

- Irene Annor-Frempong, Leader of the International Consortium of AU-EU FNSSA research at the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), Research and Innovation Consultant and member of the SANAD high-level political dialogue
- Andrés Montero Aparicio, Cabinet of the Prime Minister of Spain
- Laila Lokosang, Senior Technical Advisor (Food Systems) to the Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment, African Union
- Muriel Mambrini, Director Research and Program Evaluation, French National Research Institute for Sustainable development (IRD)
- King-David Amoah, President of The Farmers Organisation Network in Ghana
- Arwyn Jones, EU Soil Observatory, Joint Research Centre, European Commission