

Rethinking AU-EU Cooperation for More Sustainable Agri-food Systems



by Ibrahima Hathie



The UN Food Systems Summit 2021 highlighted the inability of the world's food systems to curb hunger and adapt to a changing climate, while making a major contribution to environmental degradation.¹ The Summit stressed the urgency of a transition towards sustainable, inclusive and resilient food systems. In Africa, despite progress in recent years, hunger continues to be a major challenge: indeed, it is the region where the percentage of the population facing hunger is the highest in the world (20.4 per cent). Some 298.4 million people suffered from hunger in Africa in 2023. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in the continent (58 per cent) is almost

double the global average. The number of people unable to afford a healthy diet has increased considerably in Africa, reaching 924.8 million in 2022.²

The need for a holistic approach

The complexity of the African context calls for a holistic approach and vigorous measures to put the continent on a trajectory enabling it to feed its population sustainably. Africa needs to do this against a backdrop of high population growth, rapid urbanisation, disruption from climate change and degradation of natural resources. Africa's common position on food systems makes interesting proposals

¹ United Nations, *Secretary-General's Chair Summary and Statement of Action on the UN Food Systems Summit*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/node/151530>.

² Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024*, Rome, FAO, 2024, p. 4 and 23, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cd1254en>.

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on the ways and means to enable a successful transition to sustainable food systems.³ These include: (i) actions to catalyse rapid expansion in agricultural and food productivity and production; (ii) boosting investment financing for Africa's food systems transformation agenda; (iii) ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all; and (iv) strengthening and harnessing Africa's growing local food markets.

The avenues for EU-AU cooperation

The EU is also taking the necessary reforms to dismantle and phase out its dominant unsustainable food systems very seriously. Its Farm to Fork Strategy,⁴ a key component of the European Green Deal, offers innovative prospects for a transition to sustainable and resilient European food systems.

It is in this context that the EU and the African Union (AU) adopted a Joint Vision for 2030 during the 6th Summit of Heads of State in February 2022.⁵ Among their common priorities is an investment programme to help build more sustainable and resilient economies. The programme includes support for the green transition, in particular for the implementation of African countries' Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans under the Paris

Agreement. Other support concerns industrialisation and the development of sustainable and resilient value chains. The 5th AU-EU Agriculture Ministers' Conference in June 2023 proposes interventions that promote resilient and sustainable agri-food systems. These include sustainable investment, research and innovation, climate resilience and regional trade integration.⁶

Since 2000, AU-EU cooperation has taken important steps forward with tangible benefits. The implementation of the Action Programme for Rural Transformation has led to the establishment of the Pan-African Network for Economic Policy Analysis, the Agribusiness Platform and the Africa-Europe Farmer Exchanges.⁷ The partnership has achieved success with agroecological innovations in the field, offering prospects for scaling up. Examples include projects such as SustInAfrica, EWA BELT, SustainSahel and UPSCALE which showcased the benefits of agroecological innovations on the ground, providing evidence to support their mainstreaming and setting a new benchmark for agricultural development in Africa. Science, technology and innovation are areas where progress is noticeable.

³ African Union, *African Common Position on Food Systems*, Johannesburg, African Union Development Agency, 2021, p. 10-12, <https://www.nepad.org/node/16446>.

⁴ European Commission DG for Health and Food Safety website: *Farm to Fork Strategy*, https://food.ec.europa.eu/node/665_en.

⁵ AU-EU, *Sixth European Union-African Union Summit: A Joint Vision for 2030*, 18 February 2022, <https://europa.eu/!9PFG66>.

⁶ AU-EU, *5th African Union-European Union Agriculture Ministerial Conference. Chairs Conclusions*, Rome, 30 June 2023, https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/node/1180_en.

⁷ African Union, *The 5th AU-EU Agriculture Ministers Recommit to a Renewed Partnership to Accelerate Food Systems Transformation for Sustainable Development*, 18 July 2023, <https://au.int/en/node/42999>.

Change at five different levels

Despite these successes, the challenges are still enormous and the transition to sustainable and resilient food systems capable of feeding African populations while preserving the environment is still fraught with pitfalls. Change is needed at five levels.

Scaling up agroecological practices. To go beyond pilot operations, appropriate policies and regulations must be enacted, to offer economic and financial incentives, to make technologies available, to support producers with specific farm advisory services, to create a favourable and attractive environment, and to eliminate gradually all support for conventional farming. This multi-faceted support will increase the number of users, leading to a tipping point at which the pace of change will accelerate until innovation becomes the norm.⁸

Food processing. With urbanisation and the subsequent increase in demand for food, the processing link is of crucial importance. Its ability to meet urban demand depends on an ecosystem of small and medium-sized processing enterprises (SMEs) capable of sourcing raw materials and supplying quality processed products on a regular basis at an affordable price. These SMEs often struggle to finance their activities and invest. Public policies must improve the capacity of the agri-food sector to transform agricultural produce into

increasingly sophisticated types of products demanded by consumers,⁹ and thus provide an alternative to massive food imports. Moreover, the AU promotes agri-food processing zones to move up the value chain and thus increase local processing. This is where the EU can find opportunities for partnership with Africa.

Diversification of diets. By promoting diversified diets, public authorities can contribute to the development of sustainable agri-food systems. Institutional markets (feeding schools, hospitals, barracks and prisons) can be powerful levers for influencing healthy consumption. Other promotional tools may target beliefs, norms and attitudes to influence eating habits.

Open and inclusive governance. The transformation of food systems involves a multitude of stakeholders, including a diversity of public and private actors. The complexity of food systems therefore requires mechanisms for coordinated action across different sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, water, environment, industry, trade and health, for which many African governments will need support.

Building the capacity of stakeholders in agri-food systems. To make a successful transition to sustainable food systems, decision-makers require

⁸ UN Independent Group of Scientists, *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023: Times of Crisis, Times of Change*, New York, United Nations, 2023, p. xxiv, <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789213585115>.

⁹ Ousmane Badiane et al., "The Rise of Africa's Processing Sector and Commercialization of Smallholder Agriculture", in Chakib Jenane, John M. Ulimwengu and Getaw Tadesse (eds), *Agri-food Processing Strategies for Successful Food Systems Transformation in Africa. ReSAKSS Annual Trends and Outlook Report 2022*, p. 6-22, <https://doi.org/10.54067/9781737916444>.

key capacities: vertical and horizontal coordination, sector policy integration and strategy development.

Public policies to support change

For these changes to happen, public policies need to integrate three dimensions. First, they must develop a territorial approach with an interlocking of scales,¹⁰ playing on the subsidiarity between the local, national, continental and international levels, while giving priority to strengthening local food systems. Second, the orientation should give priority to satisfying consumer needs through local markets that are firmly connected to local production systems. The diversification of product sources, in particular by developing neglected traditional value chains, would offer consumers a wider range of products while boosting producers' resilience. Third, they should pay particular attention to the empowerment of small-scale farmers by developing their capacity for action. This includes active support for smallholder farmer organisations and networks, enabling them to negotiate collectively, organise politically and share costly resources.

New directions for the Africa-EU partnership

New initiatives in Africa (Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan for Agenda 2063, post 2025 Malabo) and in Europe (Green Deal and Farm to

¹⁰ Task Force Rural Africa, *An Africa-Europe Agenda for Rural Transformation*, European Commission, March 2019, https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-06/report-tfra_mar2019_en_0.pdf.

Fork Strategy),¹¹ offer real prospects for boosting the AU-EU partnership for sustainable and resilient food systems in the two continents. The Pan-African Network for economic Analysis of Policies (PANAP), established in 2019 to support evidence-based policies,¹² is a good example of strengthening the links between science and policy, but its governance and monitoring-evaluation mechanism needs change if it is to have greater impact. Similarly, the involvement of African and European civil society in the implementation of the partnership has improved in recent years, but civil society organisations would like to see it deepened. They have launched their engagement platform but want a formalised space for dialogue with AU-EU decision-makers. A better engagement mechanism with civil society, youth and the private sector from both continents is welcome. Interventions in Africa should focus on developing national strategic plans for sustainable agri-food systems. The EU has a great deal to offer in terms of effective support.

Scaling up agroecological practices requires significant investment in research, innovation and technology, as well as institutional and physical infrastructure that meets the needs of small-scale producers. Only in this way will smallholder farmers be relieved of the constraints of inadequate access

¹¹ Anne-Katrin Bock, Laurent Bontoux and Jennifer Rudkin, *Concepts for a Sustainable EU Food System. Reflections from a Participatory Process*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2760/381319>.

¹² Official website: <https://datam.jrc.ec.europa.eu/datam/area/PANAP>.

to finance, insecure land tenure and difficult access to markets. This is a huge area for EU-AU cooperation.¹³ A large-scale, holistic approach supporting institutional markets connected to local food systems could speed up the transition to sustainable food systems. The EU could strongly support this process by sharing lessons from different experiences in regulation, incentives and governance.

Currently, African food systems suffer from low productivity in key value chains, under-investment, and pro-urban policies that tend to favour low-cost food imports.¹⁴ The EU-AU partnership could also help overcome these constraints by introducing affordable financing mechanisms for smallholders and SMEs. The EU could also support Africa in developing agro-industrial policies that help the African private sector adapt to rapidly changing and differentiated domestic and foreign markets.¹⁵ Strong support for the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area would be of great benefit, especially if the EU reviews its own policies that hamper trade with Africa.

African food systems need to undergo profound changes including the scaling up of agroecological practices, the development of a more inclusive agro-industrial policy and the promotion of diversified diets. For this to happen, sound governance and appropriate capacities are required. If the EU focuses on these priorities, the transformation of African food systems would be within reach.

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¹³ Africa-Europe Foundation, *Africa-Europe Policymaker Meeting on African Agri-food Systems' 1st ATLAS Roundtable*, June 2024, <https://www.africaeuropefoundation.org/areas-of-action/'africa-europe-policymaker-meeting-on-african-agri-food-systems'-1st-atlas-roundtable>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), *Accelerating the Private Sector for Food Systems Transformation in Africa. Africa Agriculture Status Report 2024*, Nairobi, AGRA, September 2024, <https://agra.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AASR2024-0309202401.pdf>.

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- 24 | 58 Ettore Greco, *Balancing Privacy and Innovation in AI Adoption across the G7*
- 24 | 57 Ettore Greco, *Fostering AI Innovation and Competition: The Way Ahead*
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- 24 | 55 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Root of Western Haplessness with Israel*
- 24 | 54 Darlington Tshuma and Bongiwé Mphahlele, *South Africa's G20 Presidency: Tapping into Africa's Potential through Financial, Climate and Food System Reform*
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