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de synergies*

Report of the Consultative Workshop on the Structure and Functioning
of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group for the African Seed
and Biotechnology Programme



ATELIER CONSULTATIF

STRUCTURE ET
FONCTIONNEMENT DU GROUPE
DE TRAVAIL SUR LES CULTURES
D'OPPORTUNITÉ EN AFRIQUE
POUR LE PROGRAMME AFRICAIN
SUR LES SEMENCES ET LA
BIOTECHNOLOGIE

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFSA	Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa
AICS	Italian Agency for Development Cooperation
AOCC	African Orphan Crops Consortium
ASBP	African Seed and Biotechnology Program (of the African Union)
ASBPP	African Seed and Biotechnology Partnership Platform
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CIHEAM	International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies
CNR	National Research Council of Italy
CSB	Community seed bank
CSO	Civil society organization
DSI	Digital Sequence Information
FARA	Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa
FMSS	Farmer Managed Seed Systems
FSE	Farmer Seed Enterprise
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
ITPGRFA	International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
Luke	Natural Resources Institute Finland
NEMA	National Environment Management Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NUS	Neglected and underutilized species
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures
STC-ARDWE	Specialized Technical Committee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Water and Environment
TABIO	Tanzania Alliance for Biodiversity
ToR	Terms of Reference

Summary

This report highlights the outcomes of a high-level consultative workshop convened under the EU-funded SUSTLIVES project, which promotes the strategic use of neglected and underutilized species (NUS)—now repositioned as “Opportunity Crops”—to enhance food and nutrition security, support resilient livelihoods, and contribute to climate adaptation in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Supported through the DeSIRA Initiative and coordinated by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) with technical leadership from CIHEAM-Bari, SUSTLIVES has made measurable progress in strengthening seed access, developing inclusive value chains, and shaping policy environments conducive to agrobiodiversity-based solutions. A key output of this project—facilitated by the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT under Activity 3.4—was the advancement of a regional, multi-stakeholder platform (the African Opportunity Crops Working Group) aimed at scaling opportunity crops across Africa.

The workshop convened 24 participants from over 14 countries, including representatives from research organizations, universities, NGOs, and development partners. Its primary objective was to finalize the draft Terms of Reference for the African Opportunity Crops Working Group, which will be hosted by the African Seed and Biotechnology Partnership Platform (ASBPP).

The establishment of the ASBPP is rooted in the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme (ASBP), which was formally endorsed by the AU Assembly in 2007 (Assembly/AU/Dec.135(VIII)) as a strategic framework for guiding the development and modernization of Africa’s seed systems. Under the leadership of the African Union Commission (AUC), the 3rd Ordinary Session of the Specialized Technical Committee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Water and Environment (STC-ARDWE) recommended the creation of an institutional framework to support ASBP implementation at national, regional, and continental levels. In response, the AUC’s Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture initiated a series of actions that culminated in the validation of the ASBPP. A central feature of this governance structure is the formation of specialized Working Groups (WGs), which will soon include the proposed African Opportunity Crops Working Group.

The workshop underscored strong momentum and political will to mainstream opportunity crops into national and continental strategies, aligning with broader goals on food systems transformation, climate resilience, and rural development.

Background

The **SUSTLIVES** project—“*Sustaining and Improving Local Crop Patrimony in Burkina Faso and Niger for Better Lives and Ecosystems*”—has played a catalytic role in promoting the sustainable use and management of neglected and underutilized species (NUS) to enhance food security and build climate-resilient food systems in the Sahel. Since its launch in 2021, the project has significantly improved access to quality seeds of NUS, strengthened local value chains and markets, and laid the groundwork for enabling policies and institutional frameworks. While its implementation is focused on Burkina Faso and Niger, the project's models and methodologies offer scalable solutions for broader application across Africa.

Funded by the **European Union** under the **DeSIRA Initiative**, SUSTLIVES contributes to strengthening research and innovation capacities within Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). The project is coordinated by the **Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)**, with scientific and technical management provided by **CIHEAM-Bari**.

Implementation is carried out through a multi-partner approach, notably with the **Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT**, which leads **Activity 3.4**. This activity focuses on fostering cross-country collaboration to overcome systemic barriers to the integration of NUS in sustainable, climate-adaptive food systems. Central to this effort is the development of a **regional, inclusive multi-stakeholder platform** to connect diverse actors engaged in NUS research, production, policy, and market development—across West Africa and the wider continent.

This strategic platform is designed to support long-term transformation by aligning local innovation with regional policy frameworks and investment opportunities. It positions opportunity crops as a lever for resilience, nutritional diversity, and inclusive rural development.

The “**Consultative Workshop on the Structure and Functioning of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group for the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme**” was organized to advance the establishment of this multi-stakeholder platform. This report summarizes key discussions from the consultative workshop and outlines the next steps for formalizing the African Opportunity Crops Working Group. As the SUSTLIVES project advances amid rising global recognition of neglected and underutilized species (NUS), the workshop marked a turning point. Participants agreed to reframe NUS as “Opportunity Crops” emphasizing their potential to transform agri-food systems. This terminology shift is reflected in the name of the multi-stakeholder platform and is used throughout the report to align with this new, forward-looking perspective.

The consultative workshop provided a forum to discuss the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Working Group. Further, it facilitated the sharing of findings from a stakeholder survey, mapping projects and initiatives on opportunity crops across Africa. Since the Working Group will be hosted by the African Seed and Biotechnology Partnership Platform (ASBPP), the workshop also provided an opportunity to familiarize members with the platform.

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Technical Committee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Water and Environment (STC-ARDWE) recommended the creation of an institutional framework to support ASBP implementation at national, regional, and continental levels. In response, the AUC's Department of Rural Economy and Agriculture initiated a series of actions that culminated in the validation of the ASBPP. A central feature of this governance structure is the formation of specialized Working Groups (WGs), which will soon include the proposed African Opportunity Crops Working Group.

The consultative workshop builds on earlier efforts under Activity 3.4, including a February 2024 workshop in Ouagadougou with participants from Niger and Burkina Faso. That event focused on mapping stakeholders in NUS food systems and establishing forums to promote collaboration and sustained engagement. It also draws from a two-day regional workshop held in July 2024, also in Ouagadougou, which brought together 42 participants from across Africa to further support the formation of the Working Group.

Opening Remarks

The workshop opened with remarks from key representatives of the SUSTLIVES initiative. **Francesca Grazioli** (Scientist I – Value Chains and Markets Expert, Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT) began by outlining the SUSTLIVES project and its activities, including seed system development, trials, value chain enhancement, awareness campaigns, and policy engagement. She emphasized that as the project nears completion, establishing a multi-stakeholder platform to sustain collaboration and shape effective policies is essential for translating research and best practices into meaningful, lasting outcomes. She then proceeded to share the agenda for the day (see Annex 1).

Hamid El Bilali (Senior Researcher and Scientific Administrator, Project Manager – SUSTLIVES, International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies, CIHEAM-Bari) highlighted that the workshop was crucial for defining the Working Group's scope, governance, and structure. He underscored the importance of collaboration among diverse stakeholders and the critical role of NUS in enhancing the sustainability and resilience of Africa's food systems, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and Africa's Agenda 2063. He expressed enthusiasm for meaningful dialogue and impactful outcomes of the workshop.

Filippo Acasto (Programme Coordinator - SUSTLIVES, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), Ouagadougou) noted the existing gap between the potential of NUS and their current recognition in policies, research, and markets, but expressed optimism about the energy and collaboration already building across countries and institutions. He stressed the importance of inclusive, locally grounded cooperation that addresses NUS not only technically but also politically and socially, shifting the narrative around agriculture. In conclusion, he thanked all participants for joining the workshop and said he looked forward to the discussions.

Workshop Participants

The consultative workshop opened with a round of introductions, during which all 24 participants briefly presented themselves and their institutional affiliations. Evidently, the workshop brought

together a diverse and multidisciplinary group of participants from over 14 countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Italy, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, the Netherlands, Niger, Switzerland, and Finland.

Participants represented a wide range of institutions—international agricultural research centers (e.g., Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, ICRISAT, CIFOR-ICRAF), national research organizations (e.g., KALRO), universities (e.g., University Joseph KI-ZERBO), and NGOs and civil society networks such as Slow Food, SWISSAID, and PELUM. The group also included development and financial institutions such as the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and the Common Fund for Commodities (CFC). Notably, the presence of representatives from the African Seed and Biotechnology Partnership Platform (ABSPP) was particularly significant, as the African Opportunity Crops Working Group will be hosted under the ABSPP. For a complete list of participants, see Annex 2.

Workshop Objectives

The objectives of the workshop included:

1. To share findings from a stakeholder survey mapping opportunity crops initiatives across Africa.
2. To introduce the African Seed and Biotechnology Partnership Platform (ASBPP) as the host of the Working Group.
3. To gather stakeholder inputs on the structure, roles, and functioning of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group within the framework of the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme.
4. To review and discuss the draft Terms of Reference of the Working Group.
5. To define next steps for the formalization and operationalization of the Working Group.

Initiatives, programmes and projects on Opportunity crops in Africa

By Gloria Otieno – Scientist II – Genetic Resources and Food Security Policy Specialist, Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

In her [first presentation](#), Gloria Otieno provided an overview of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group. She explained the rationale for focusing on NUS and how the Working Group supports and builds on the objectives of the SUSTLIVES project, particularly that of Activity 3.4 (Strengthening inter-country and international dialogue, scaling up and creating synergies). Gloria outlined the group's formation, referencing key milestones such as the joint inception workshop held on February 20–21, 2024, at Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and the regional stakeholder workshop held in the same city on July 3–4, 2024. She then presented the proposed structure of the multi-stakeholder platform and highlighted national stakeholder forums held in Niger and Burkina Faso, with one proposed for Uganda. She closed her first presentation by detailing the Working Group's objectives and emphasized its strong alignment with the African Union.

In her [second presentation](#), Gloria shared the results of the SUSTLIVES Stakeholder Survey, conducted under Activity 3.4. A total of 67 respondents from diverse countries and organizations participated, providing insights into their affiliations, roles, and experiences in NUS-related projects over the past five years.

The results showed that stakeholders represent a diverse mix of organizations, including research institutions, NGOs, farmers' associations, seed companies, policy networks, and international platforms such as the African Orphan Crops Consortium (AOCC), the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), and CGIAR. The projects discussed encompassed a wide range of crops beyond major staples—such as African eggplant, fonio, baobab, spider plant, pigeon peas, sesame, and indigenous legumes—highlighting the rich species diversity being promoted for food security, nutrition, and climate resilience. These initiatives addressed multiple themes, including conservation, breeding, value addition, marketing, nutrition, health, and policy.

The survey also examined how stakeholders engage and share information, revealing a strong preference for participatory platforms organized around specific subject areas—such as conservation—or geographic regions like Southern Africa, or focused on particular crops. Respondents also highlighted a variety of preferred communication channels, including webinars, WhatsApp groups, field days, and training sessions, alongside more formal tools such as newsletters, websites, and social media. These findings emphasize the need for diverse and accessible communication strategies to foster collaboration and effective knowledge exchange within the NUS community.

Another key finding was the wide range of stakeholder platforms respondents are affiliated with, including farmers' research networks, seed saver initiatives, policy committees, and agroecological associations. This diversity reflects strong stakeholder organization and provides a solid foundation for building synergies. At the same time, it underscores the importance of coordinated action to avoid fragmentation and enhance the impact of initiatives supporting NUS value chains.

Finally, the presentation emphasized that the survey serves as a preliminary diagnostic tool to map stakeholders and their interests, which will guide future activities in the proposed African Opportunity Crops Working Group. These include the development of targeted engagement mechanisms and support for multi-actor platforms that promote NUS at national, regional, and continental levels, ensuring alignment with the broader goals of food system transformation and agroecological transition. The results of the questionnaire will be distributed to all meeting participants in the upcoming weeks.

Discussion

During the discussion, a participant requested clarification on the functioning and purpose of the Working Group. He observed that the initiative appears to have a dual nature: on one hand, it resembles a network or community of practice intended to facilitate the exchange of experiences among stakeholders; on the other hand, it seems to operate as a more formal Working Group affiliated with the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme (ASBP), potentially contributing to technical work or policy processes at the level of the African Union.

He further expressed that he remains unclear about the specific role and structure of the ASBP itself, which adds to the ambiguity surrounding the positioning of the Working Group. He also raised a

concern regarding the apparent reluctance of small-scale farmers and civil society organizations (CSOs) to actively engage with the Working Group. In his view, this hesitancy could be linked to perceptions of the ASBP's association with biotechnology or other factors that are not yet fully transparent to him.

In response to the participant's request for clarification, Gloria provided further explanation regarding the structure and purpose of the Working Group. She explained that the platform operates through national stakeholder forums, which bring together diverse actors within each participating country to exchange experiences, coordinate activities, and strengthen national initiatives. These then build up to regional groups and then to the working group at a continental level. Within this broader structure, Gloria emphasized that more specialized groups—such as millet breeders or NGOs working directly with farmers—can form communities of practice focused on specific crops, themes, or technical areas, while remaining linked to and aligned with the overarching continental platform.

She clarified that the Working Group is anchored under the ASBP, a continental initiative that develops policies, strategies, and frameworks to support agricultural development in Africa. The Working Group, she emphasized, is intended to ensure that research evidence and grassroots experiences contribute meaningfully to policy processes at the African Union level and can be scaled.

Gloria also pointed out that ASBP hosts other clusters, including those focused specifically on biotechnology and plant breeding, which are distinct from the African Opportunity Crops Working Group. She highlighted that the Alliance of Bioversity and CIAT, in collaboration with ASBP, has been actively engaged in supporting farmer-managed seed systems, including recent efforts to develop a continental framework and draft strategy to guide national policies, laws, and regulations in this area.

Looking ahead, Gloria expressed hope that the Working Group will play a key role in advancing cross-border strategies, frameworks, and conservation policies for opportunity crops such as moringa, where action must extend beyond national boundaries to achieve meaningful, continental-scale impact.

She concluded by stressing that the platform is designed to be inclusive and participatory, noting strong engagement from CSOs to date. She encouraged stakeholders not to approach the multi-stakeholder platform with hesitation, but rather to see it as a valuable space for dialogue and collaboration. Finally, she welcomed Andrew Mushita, an active member of the platform and champion of farmer-managed seed systems, who would provide additional insights into the platform's functioning.

The African Seed and Biotechnology Programme and its potentialities

By Andrew Mushita – Executive Director, Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT)

In his [presentation](#), Andrew introduced the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme (ASBP) and highlighted its potential. His presentation emphasized the ASBP's role as a strategic African Union platform aimed at improving seed systems across the continent. The ASBP supports evidence-based policy formulation, encourages collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and facilitates dialogue

through structured Working Groups that address components such as seed quality, genetic resource management, biotechnology, and farmer-led seed systems. The platform operates under a governance framework that includes a General Assembly of stakeholders, and its activities are coordinated by the African Union Development Agency – new Partnerships for African development (AUDA-NEPAD), which also serves as the secretariat.

Andrew emphasized the transformative role of the ASBP in improving farmers' access to high-quality, climate-resilient seeds by supporting both formal and Farmer Managed Seed Systems (FMSS). He highlighted the importance of integrating local knowledge and empowering communities through mechanisms such as Community Seed Banks (CSBs) and Farmer Seed Enterprises (FSEs), which are essential for advancing seed sovereignty and enhancing food and nutrition security. He also pointed to the potential of appropriate biotechnologies to provide timely, innovative solutions for farmers, especially in the face of climate change. With strong regional and national collaboration, the ASBP is well-positioned to foster inclusive and sustainable seed system development across Africa.

Discussions

During the discussion, concerns were raised about the types of biotechnology interventions considered appropriate within the Working Group. It was noted that the ASBP's stance on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and new genomic technologies remains unclear, which may pose challenges for organizations whose partners and community seed banks are cautious about such technologies. This lack of clarity was seen as a potential barrier to participation for groups that prioritize open, farmer-led approaches.

In response, it was clarified that while the ASBP does engage with biotechnology, its application is context specific. The suitability of any innovation or intervention must be evaluated based on each country's particular needs, challenges, and regulatory frameworks.

The concern was reiterated that certain organizations cannot support biotechnology approaches linked to proprietary models of innovation. They expressed particular concern about GMOs and genomic technologies associated with patents and intellectual property rights, which they view as incompatible with their principles. It was also noted that these organizations are actively advocating against such patents at the EU and European Patent Office and were surprised by the possibility that ASBP might align with such models.

On further discussion, clarification was provided on the role and mandate of the ASBP, emphasizing that it is currently the only continental framework for seed systems formally endorsed by all African Union (AU) member states. Additionally, the ASBP aligns with CAADP goals and Agenda 2063, and supports both farmer-managed and commercial seed systems. The ASBP includes a broad range of technologies, including biotechnology. It was noted that the role of biotechnology within the program has been widely debated, including at the General Assembly and Steering Group, reflecting the varying positions and acceptance levels across AU member states. However, it was underscored that the AU does not promote or impose any specific technology; the platform remains neutral, respecting national sovereignty and allowing countries to adopt and scale innovations according to their own contexts. Examples were cited to illustrate this flexibility, such as Nigeria's advancement in biotechnology compared to other countries that have taken different approaches.

While the clarification was acknowledged, concerns remained regarding the use of biotechnology for genetic modification, which continues to be a point of contention for some organizations and their partners. It was noted that although certain applications, such as trait identification, may be acceptable, genetic modification remains problematic within certain stakeholder principles.


In response, it was reiterated that biotechnology extends beyond GMOs and includes a broader set of scientific tools that can add value to opportunity crops. Examples were shared, including research on berries with nutraceutical properties for cancer treatment and jute mallow's potential in preventing colon cancer. Additionally, ongoing work on African orphan crops was highlighted, showcasing how trait identification and analysis of bioactive compounds are contributing to deeper understanding of the nutritional and health benefits of these underutilized species.




It was proposed that discussions on biotechnology within the Working Group be temporarily set aside to allow the group to concentrate on immediate priorities—such as seed quality and agronomic practices—where there is broad stakeholder agreement. Support was expressed for the earlier clarification on biotechnology's broader scope, and attention was drawn to the growing importance of digital sequence information (DSI) derived from NUS. It was emphasized that the platform should remain actively engaged in global policy discussions on DSI and explore mechanisms to ensure that benefits from the use of such data are shared fairly with the communities of origin.

Review and discussion of the draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Working Group

By *Francesca Grazioli – Scientist I – Markets and Value chains – Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT*

In her [presentation](#), Francesca shared the draft ToR and led the group discussion, asking members to reflect on them with four key questions in mind: Does this section reflect the urgency and relevance of opportunity crops across African contexts? Does it align with national, regional, and continental priorities (e.g., CAADP, ASBP, ITPGRFA)? Is the proposed vision ambitious yet grounded? Are there any repetitions?


Conservation and Seed Systems

 <p style="font-size: small; margin-top: 5px;">Financé par l'Union européenne</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop strategies for conservation of opportunity crops in collaboration with gene banks and regional collections e.g., the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Plant Genetic Resources Centre, World Vegetable Centre, and national gene banks where applicable;
 <p style="font-size: x-small; margin-top: 5px;">AGENZIA ITALIANA PER LA COOPERAZIONE ALLO SVILUPPO</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Coordinate country and regional platforms on community seed banks (CSBs) for conservation and enhance access of genetic resources including those of opportunity crops;
 <p style="font-size: x-small; margin-top: 5px;">CIHEAM BARI</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Create information sharing mechanisms for genetic resources, seeds and new technologies of opportunity crops to link different actors in conservation, breeding and research;
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Développer des stratégies de conservation des cultures d'opportunité en collaboration avec les banques de gènes et les collections régionales, par ex, le Centre des ressources phylogénétiques de la Communauté de développement de l'Afrique australe (SADC), le Centre mondial des légumes et les banques de gènes nationales, le cas échéant ; 2. Coordonner les plateformes nationales et régionales sur les banques de semences communautaires (CSB) pour la conservation et améliorer l'accès aux ressources génétiques, y compris celles des cultures d'opportunité ; 3. Créer des mécanismes de partage de l'information pour les ressources génétiques, les semences et les nouvelles technologies des cultures d'opportunité afin de relier les différents acteurs de la conservation, de la sélection et de la recherche ;

During the discussion, a concern was raised regarding the first point of the proposed strategy, noting that it appears to focus primarily on ex-situ conservation. The importance of explicitly referencing in-situ conservation was emphasized, particularly to ensure that stakeholders involved in both conservation approaches are meaningfully engaged in the development of the strategy.

A clarification of the term "new technologies" was requested to avoid ambiguity and ensure a shared understanding among all participants. It was proposed to consider alternative terms that would be more inclusive of traditional technologies, which, despite not being recent, remain highly effective. A broader discussion followed, with other participants contributing to the conversation. The group collectively explored the idea of replacing "new" with terms such as "effective" or "functional", to better capture the diversity of tools and approaches relevant to opportunity crops, without implying an exclusive focus on modern innovations.

The ToR's first point was addressed by another participant, suggesting that the focus should remain on developing strategies for the conservation of opportunity crops or NUS, while ensuring the

language is broad enough to be inclusive. It was further proposed that a separate point be added to encourage collaboration between gene banks at different levels, with terminology kept generic to avoid unintentionally excluding particular groups or stakeholders through specific wording.

The ToR's second point was also discussed with a note that the performance and sustainability of CSBs vary significantly across the continent. It was recommended that the Working Group prioritize efforts to strengthen weaker CSBs and identify regions, especially in rural areas, where new CSBs could be established to improve local seed system resilience.

A broader reflection on the need for improved networking followed, highlighting that weak linkages exist not only at the CSB level but also among national and regional gene banks. It was suggested that the platform could promote the establishment of sub-regional and regional networks of conservation actors, connecting CSBs, national gene banks, and other relevant institutions. However, uncertainty was expressed regarding whether this proposal should be incorporated into the official text, as it may extend beyond the current scope of the platform.



4. **Scaling up best practices on conservation and community seed banking**, research and breeding, and the use and management of opportunity crops to maximise their impact in terms of food security and nutrition;

5. Support **knowledge sharing** and capacity building of inclusive seed systems especially those of opportunity crops and seed quality assurance, dissemination etc.;



6. Support knowledge sharing and **capacity building in food systems related to opportunity crops**, with a focus on value addition, nutrition, food security, and climate resilience;

4. Étendre les meilleures pratiques sur la **conservation et les banques de semences** communautaires, la recherche et la sélection, ainsi que l'utilisation et la gestion des cultures d'opportunité afin de maximiser leur impact en termes de sécurité alimentaire et de nutrition ;

5. Soutenir le partage des connaissances et le renforcement des capacités **des systèmes semenciers inclusifs, en particulier ceux des cultures d'opportunité**, ainsi que l'assurance qualité des semences, la diffusion, etc. ;

6. Soutenir le partage des connaissances et le **renforcement des capacités dans les systèmes alimentaires liés aux cultures d'opportunité**, en mettant l'accent sur la valeur ajoutée, la nutrition, la sécurité alimentaire et la résilience climatique ;

The ToR's fourth point was discussed with recognition of the importance of scaling up best practices for opportunity crops. However, it was emphasized that, before scaling efforts can proceed, it is essential to first identify what constitutes a best practice. It was proposed that one of the initial tasks of the Working Group should be to define clear criteria for best practices and to conduct a mapping exercise to identify these practices across different contexts and countries.

In relation to knowledge sharing and capacity building, a recommendation was made to simplify the current wording. It was suggested that the phrase "Support knowledge sharing and capacity building on opportunity crops and related topics" be adopted, as this avoids the need to list or narrowly define specific thematic areas, thereby keeping the statement more inclusive and flexible.

A general remark was offered, highlighting the importance of ensuring clarity on the roles, responsibilities, available resources, and member expectations within the Working Group. It was emphasized that establishing these elements early on is essential for fostering effective collaboration and managing expectations. It was noted that these points will be addressed under the next agenda item, where additional details related to the structure, functions, and operational aspects of the Working Group will be presented.



7. Support knowledge sharing and capacity development on **sustainable options for CSBs**, and both inclusive seed systems and value chain models;

8. **Promote gender and youth inclusivity** by integrating gender- and youth-sensitive approaches into the working group's activities to ensure the active participation of women, youth etc. in opportunity crop initiatives and community seed banking. As well as, design and implement programs that address gender disparities in access to resources, training, and decision-making within seed systems and the value chains of opportunity crops;



7. Soutenir le partage des connaissances et le développement des capacités **sur les options durables pour les banques communautaires de semences**, et à la fois les systèmes de semences inclusifs et les modèles de chaîne de valeur ;

8. **Promouvoir l'inclusion du genre et de la jeunesse** en intégrant des approches sensibles au genre et à la jeunesse dans les activités du groupe de travail afin d'assurer la participation active des femmes, des jeunes, etc. dans les initiatives de cultures d'opportunité et les banques communautaires de semences. De même, concevoir et mettre en œuvre des programmes qui abordent les disparités entre les sexes dans l'accès aux ressources, à la formation et à la prise de décision au sein des systèmes de semences et des chaînes de valeur des cultures d'opportunité ;

Regarding the ToR's eight point, it was suggested that the focus be revised to emphasize what the Working Group is expected to accomplish, as outlined in the second sentence, rather than including statements about its functioning or governance, which are already defined by its role within the ASBPP. It was proposed that details on the group's functioning could instead be outlined in a separate document. This approach was agreed upon.



9. Engage private sector organizations and entrepreneurs to share innovations, including new technologies and products, and collaborate on the development of value chains for opportunity crops;

10. Strengthen regional trade and improve market access by leveraging opportunities within trade blocs, removing barriers, and advancing value chain development and processing for opportunity crops. Measures will include supporting trade facilitation through the alignment of quality and Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, while reinforcing connections among producers, processors, and buyers. Other key actions include conducting market assessments, analyzing policies, engaging stakeholders, and building the capacity of farmers and Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);



9. Engager les organisations et les entrepreneurs du secteur privé à partager les innovations, y compris les nouvelles technologies et les nouveaux produits, et à collaborer au développement des chaînes de valeur pour les cultures d'opportunité ;

10. Renforcer le commerce régional et améliorer l'accès aux marchés en tirant parti des possibilités offertes par les blocs commerciaux, en supprimant les obstacles et en favorisant le développement de la chaîne de valeur et la transformation des cultures d'avenir. Les mesures comprendront le soutien à la facilitation des échanges par l'alignement de la qualité et des mesures sanitaires et phytosanitaires (SPS), tout en renforçant les liens entre les producteurs, les transformateurs et les acheteurs. D'autres actions clés comprennent la réalisation d'évaluations de marché, l'analyse des politiques...

It was shared that a proposal had been made to establish a community of practice or a similar platform to enable greater private sector engagement, particularly in discussions related to markets and trade for opportunity crops. It was noted that this would help bring private actors into the conversation in a structured way.

Regarding the ToR's ninth point, a recommendation was made to delete the phrase "including new technologies and products" to avoid ambiguity and potential misunderstandings about the scope of technologies involved. This suggestion was agreed upon.

A question was raised regarding the ToR's tenth point, asking whether it is intended to focus solely on the trade of NUS seeds or whether it also includes products derived from NUS. It was clarified that the intention is to address both—the trade of NUS seeds as well as products originating from them. It was further suggested that, in discussing regional and national trade for NUS, it is essential to be mindful of issues related to patents and trade conditions, which may create unintended barriers or complexities.

Concerns were highlighted regarding the phrase "alignment of quality and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures," with an explanation that, while such measures are crucial for facilitating regional seed trade, they also risk becoming barriers for farmer-managed seeds and smallholder production systems if not carefully framed. In response, agreement was expressed with the concern, and it was proposed that the wording be revised to clarify that the intention is not to increase the stringency of quality or SPS measures, but rather to ensure they do not become obstacles to NUS trade. It was also suggested that this point be simplified by concluding the sentence earlier to avoid excessive technical details.

Support was expressed for this approach, with an emphasis on the importance of clearly defining the mandate and limitations of the Working Group. It was noted that broader trade policies often fall within political rather than technical domains and are therefore beyond the scope of the group.

Instead, a focus was suggested on improving marketing and market access for producers, particularly by leveraging opportunities available within existing trade blocs, as this aligns more closely with the group's purpose.

A broader reflection was offered, suggesting that while it may not be immediately necessary, it would be highly beneficial to accompany the group's work with a systematic commitment to develop context-specific indicators. This would help ensure that progress is measurable, impact is tracked, and accountability is maintained throughout the process. Agreement was expressed with this proposal, and it was added that the development of criteria for identifying best practices—discussed earlier—should be complemented by the definition of key performance indicators (KPIs). It was recommended that this be incorporated into the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Working Group as part of a broader action plan.

A final remark was made stressing the importance of incorporating consumer preference data and farmers' knowledge when prioritizing opportunity crops. This approach was explained as essential for strengthening the link between production and market demand, thereby supporting the successful promotion of these crops. Agreement was expressed with this observation, along with a suggestion that this dimension could be considered during the next stage of the process or integrated into the action plan. A commitment was also made to review the current ToR to ensure that consumer perspectives are explicitly reflected, if not already included.



11. Encourage and inform change across scientific, operational, legal and regulatory areas that affect seed systems, production, marketing and export of opportunity crops;

12. Engage in policy development and advocacy on access and benefit sharing, seed policies, food policies, and regulations related to opportunity crops across the continent;



13. Develop continental standards and protocols for access and benefit sharing of opportunity crops in line with the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Nagoya protocol;

11. Encourager et informer le changement dans les domaines scientifiques, opérationnels, juridiques et réglementaires qui affectent les systèmes de semences, la production, la commercialisation et l'exportation des cultures d'opportunité ;

12. S'engager dans le développement de politiques et le plaidoyer sur l'accès et le partage des bénéfices, les politiques de semences, les politiques alimentaires et les réglementations liées aux cultures d'opportunité à travers le continent ;

13. Élaborer des normes et des protocoles continentaux pour l'accès et le partage des avantages des cultures d'opportunité conformément au Traité international sur les ressources phytogénétiques pour l'alimentation et l'agriculture (ITPGRFA), à la Convention sur la diversité biologique (CDB) et au protocole de Nagoya ;

The discussion on the ToR's thirteenth point was opened with a suggestion that the specific elements included in the draft should be maintained, as they provide necessary detail and clarity for the Working Group's future actions.

Several points requiring clarification and adjustment across different sections of the draft document were then raised. Regarding the ToR's eleventh point, it was recommended that terms such as “affect seed systems” be rephrased, as the word “affect” may imply unintended negative consequences for

seed systems, production, marketing, or export of opportunity crops. Alternative language such as “encourage and inform change across scientific data” or “promote/increase space for positive change” was suggested to convey a more constructive, intentional impact.

For the ToR’s twelfth point, it was emphasized that the text should reflect that the work is not limited to developing new policies, but must also include the reform, revision, or enhancement of existing policies, laws, and regulations. The need to explicitly mention seed regulations and seed laws alongside policies was underlined, given that the term “policies” can be ambiguous and may refer only to non-binding strategies rather than binding legal instruments. Making this distinction was stressed as essential for clarity and practical implementation.

On the ToR’s thirteenth point, the importance of explicitly including DSI in the document was highlighted, with a suggestion that it be referenced immediately after benefit-sharing under the category of genetic resources and DSI. It was explained that ensuring DSI falls within the scope of access and benefit-sharing frameworks is critical, and that concerns on this topic have been voiced by many African states in international forums such as the CBD and ITPGRFA.

Regarding the ToR’s fourteenth point, clarification was requested on the term “bio-community protocols”, which was noted as unfamiliar. It was suggested that the more widely recognized concept of prior and informed consent be used, which should serve as a prerequisite for accessing genetic resources, community seed banks, and farmers' fields. The need to prevent biopiracy through patents or plant variety protections was emphasized, with examples cited of companies claiming farmers' genetic resources through such mechanisms. It was recommended that requirements be introduced for companies to declare the origin of the resource and to provide evidence of prior informed consent before accessing or commercializing genetic resources.

A response was provided to these concerns, clarifying that bio-community protocols are locally developed guidelines that outline the procedures for legally accessing genetic resources that fall outside the multilateral system, especially those managed by communities and community seed banks. These protocols were described as mechanisms to formalize the requirement for community permission and prior informed consent, often involving authorities such as NEMA or relevant Ministries of Environment to support benefit-sharing negotiations and ensure legal compliance.

It was acknowledged that such protocols are not yet widely established, and it was emphasized that the platform could play a critical role in supporting their development and scaling. Agreement was expressed with the suggestion to modify the language in the ToR to explicitly reference “protocols for prior and informed consent to access genetic resources”, to provide greater clarity and alignment with internationally recognized principles.



14. Develop continent guideline for bio-community protocols for accessing genetic resources of opportunity crops from community seed banks and farmers' fields;

14. Élaborer des lignes directrices continentales pour les protocoles biocommunautaires pour l'accès aux ressources génétiques des cultures d'opportunité à partir des banques de semences communautaires et des champs des agriculteurs ;

15. Communicate success stories, best practices and related achievements through newsletters, social media and other platforms such as International Treaty governing body meetings, meetings of Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) and African Union's Seed and Biotechnology Platform (ASBP).

15. Communiquer les réussites, les meilleures pratiques et les réalisations connexes par le biais de bulletins d'information, de médias sociaux et d'autres plateformes telles que les réunions des organes directeurs des traités internationaux, les réunions de la Commission des ressources génétiques pour l'alimentation et l'agriculture (CRGAA) et la Plateforme de l'Union africaine sur les semences et la biotechnologie (ASBP).



Appreciation was expressed for the contributions made, and it was emphasized that the ToR will explicitly reference biopiracy and establish prior informed consent as a precondition for accessing genetic resources. An overview of the ToR's fifteenth point was then provided, noting that this section differs from other knowledge-sharing and capacity-building points by being less technical and more focused on broad outreach and engagement. In response, a recommendation was made that the sentence should conclude after "social media" to avoid the risk of excluding specific groups or stakeholders through overly prescriptive language.

A broader question was raised, asking whether a platform already exists for actors working on genetic resources, or if there is an opportunity to create one. It was noted that, to current knowledge, no such platform is operational, and it was suggested that establishing one could help broaden the scope of engagement beyond opportunity crops, as many of the proposed policies and protocols are not exclusive to those crops.

A proposal was made via chat to integrate a foresight approach into the policy work for seed systems transformation. It was explained that such an approach would help ensure that policies are grounded in inclusive design and long-term visioning, allowing trends to be anticipated, innovation to be guided, and interventions to be aligned with evolving needs across diverse agricultural landscapes.

In response to the question about platforms, it was shared that ASBP already hosts several Working Groups, including one on plant genetic resources conservation, which covers a broader range of species beyond NUS. It was noted that discussions are already underway on how to integrate the conservation work of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group with the broader conservation activities under ASBP.

Concerns were expressed regarding the ToR's fourteenth point, questioning whether the proposed guidelines would complement existing frameworks developed under the International Treaty or by African groups, especially since some NUS are already addressed within those instruments. The

issue of the continental scope was also raised, with a query as to whether “continental” suggests Africa-specific approaches, separate from those being developed in Europe or other regions.

This concern was acknowledged as valid and requiring group discussion. Existing collaborations with European partners such as Luke, CNR, and others were noted, along with hope that the initiative can grow to engage stakeholders beyond Africa. A phased approach was suggested, starting with a continental focus while keeping the door open to broader dialogue. The possibility of organizing a side event at the upcoming Treaty meeting was mentioned to gauge global interest, recognizing that this is a complex topic deserving careful reflection.

Support was expressed for the proposal, affirming that there is nothing preventing expansion beyond the continental level in the future. However, it was agreed that beginning with a more targeted focus is advisable, with broader engagement to be considered as part of the group’s evolving strategy.

A suggestion was added for synergy, noting that recent interactions have taken place with individuals from the Crop Trust, which is also working on NUS and related strategies. It was recommended that collaboration be explored to avoid duplication, enhance complementarity, and optimize the use of available resources.

A final recommendation was proposed: that the group define 2–3 overarching objectives to help frame its work clearly and cohesively. It was pointed out that inconsistent use of terminology across different initiatives has hindered collaboration in the past. Including all relevant terms in the introductory section of the ToR, as done in the draft, was recommended to ensure clarity and alignment from the outset.

Discussion on Roles, Representation, and Governance Framework for the Working Group

By Gloria Otieno, Scientist II – Genetic Resources and Food Security Policy Specialist, Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT.

Gloria outlined key elements from the [ASBPP's operational guidelines](#), emphasizing three core functions of the ASBPP:

- Improve decision making and policy formulation;
- Supporting evidence-based advocacy;
- Enhance knowledge sharing.

She explained that the platform serves as a policy think tank, supporting seed systems development and aligning with the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme (ASBP). Gloria noted the importance of reflecting these functions in the ToRs of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group.

Gloria emphasized that moving forward, there was a need to develop a core team of around 10 members. She noted the importance of agreeing on the modalities, including decisions on who would lead and co-lead the working group. She also highlighted the need to identify the key emerging issues to be addressed—both immediate, medium-term, and long-term priorities. She suggested that the group should then prepare a comprehensive work plan and budget, which could be presented for approval at the Steering Group meeting.

Discussion

A concern was raised about the proposed working group structure, noting that although it is intended to consist of around 10 core members, interest has already been expressed by over 20 participants. It was questioned whether a single group could effectively fulfill the dual purpose outlined in the ToR, both providing policy recommendations and facilitating knowledge exchange. The possibility of creating two interlinked groups was suggested: one smaller, more engaged group focused on technical and policy work, and another broader community of practice for wider participation and knowledge sharing.

Support was expressed for this suggestion, and it was noted that the initial design of the platform had included stakeholder forums at the country level, with representatives from thematic areas (e.g., conservation, gene banks, private sector, consumer groups) feeding into the working group. It was emphasized that the intention was not for everyone to be part of the core team, but for each stakeholder group to be represented. Additionally, the possibility of maintaining an online platform to allow broader, peripheral participation was mentioned, while retaining a smaller core group to engage more deeply at the ASBP level.

Reflection was offered on the original idea of creating a dedicated website for the platform to serve as a central repository. However, concerns about long-term sustainability, resource availability, and maintenance responsibilities were highlighted, making this approach uncertain. In reference to the earlier point, it was suggested that a document or chart be drafted to outline the structure of the platform, such as the number of people involved, institutional representation, and country-level participation. A proposal was made to create a visual graphic to clarify and simplify the governance structure.

It was agreed that further consideration should be given to the structure. The importance of establishing multi-stakeholder platforms at the country level was emphasized, with the observation that many countries already have existing initiatives such as TABIO or seed working groups. To avoid duplication, it was stressed that efforts should build on what already exists. The value of a single forum to facilitate cross-country exchange was also highlighted, allowing countries to learn from each other's experiences.

The need to clearly define the working group's scope and limitations was emphasized. While its role at the African Union level is significant, it was noted that certain issues may require action at national or regional levels. A recommendation was made to revisit the ToR to ensure alignment with the broader mandate of the ASBP and to clarify the group's responsibilities and complementarities with other initiatives. Transparent governance was identified as crucial, particularly in relation to member selection and representation. It was also pointed out that the current framework includes only one working group without subgroups. Clarification of governance and structural aspects was deemed essential for ensuring the group's effectiveness going forward.

The points raised were acknowledged, and it was noted that addressing them will require development of the schematic diagram previously mentioned, which would help clarify governance, representation, and related issues. It was agreed that, since not everyone can participate at the AU level, mechanisms must be established for broader participation beyond the AU. These may include communities of practice on conservation, stakeholder forums, or regional platforms. A more structured approach to involving people was recognized as necessary. It was concluded that the next step will be the upcoming Steering Committee meeting, where confirmation of the Working Group's acceptance (pending one final step) is expected.

Next steps for the Working Group

By Francesca Grazioli, Scientist I – Value Chains and Markets Expert, Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

The next steps for the Working Group involve revising and finalizing its ToRs, which will then be circulated among potential members for review and endorsement. Following this, an open call will be made inviting individuals and institutions to express interest in joining the Working Group. A particular focus will be placed on establishing a technical Working Group that reflects balanced representation across key functional areas, namely conservation, research and breeding, value addition and marketing, private sector engagement, human nutrition and health, capacity building, and policy. This inclusive structure aims to ensure that the group draws on a diverse range of expertise to effectively advance its objectives. This should ideally be done over July 2025. Once this step is complete the ToRs will be shared with the African Union for endorsement. The working group is expected to be launched in the month of September at the African Food systems Forum in Senegal.

Closing Remarks and Conclusion

The meeting concluded with closing reflections from representatives of the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, CIHEAM-Bari, and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) in Ouagadougou. Participants acknowledged the substantial progress made in shaping the structure, priorities, and scope of the Opportunity Crops Working Group under the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme (ASBP). Discussions reflected a strong collective commitment to advancing NUS within Africa's food system transformation, while ensuring the platform remains inclusive, transparent, and responsive to stakeholder needs.

Several priority issues were identified for further reflection, including the framing of biotechnology, safeguards for prior informed consent and protection against biopiracy, integration of Digital Sequence Information (DSI) into access and benefit-sharing frameworks, and alignment with existing regional and international initiatives. The importance of enhancing collaboration with ongoing platforms, encouraging private sector participation, and—where relevant—broadening the scope beyond NUS was also emphasized.

Next steps include finalizing the Terms of Reference (ToR), integrating inputs from the meeting, and defining clear objectives and performance indicators to guide the Working Group's efforts. Participants re-affirmed their commitment to building on these foundations to create a collaborative space for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and coordinated action in support of opportunity crops, resilient seed systems, and equitable benefit-sharing across the continent.

The organizers expressed their gratitude for the active and constructive participation of all attendees and encouraged ongoing engagement as the platform continues to evolve.

Annex 1: Consultative Workshop Agenda



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(En français ci-dessous)

CONSULTATIVE WORKSHOP

Structure and Functioning of the African Opportunity Crops Working Group for the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme

4 June 2025

GMT 12.00-16.00/ EAT 15.00-19.00

Online: [Registration Link](#)

(Simultaneous translation will be available in English and French)

Agenda

Tentative Duration	Topic	Speaker
15m	Opening remarks	<p><i>Francesca Grazioli</i> Scientist I – Value Chains and Markets Expert Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT</p> <p><i>Hamid El Bilali</i> Senior Researcher and Scientific Administrator Project Manager - SUSTLIVES International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM-Bari)</p> <p><i>Filippo Acasto</i> Programme Coordinator- SUSTLIVES Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), Ouagadougou</p>
20m	Presentation of key findings from the recent questionnaire mapping projects and initiatives on opportunity crops across Africa (Including Q & A session)	<p><i>Gloria Otieno</i> Scientist II – Genetic Resources and Food Security Policy Specialist Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT</p>



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30m	Presentation of the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme and its potentialities (Including Q & A session)	<i>Andrew Mushita</i> Executive Director Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT)
BREAK (15m)		
40m	Review and discussion of the draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Working Group	<i>Francesca Grazioli</i> Scientist I – Value Chains and Markets Expert Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT
30m	Confirmation of core and satellite members & endorsement of ToR	<i>Gloria Otieno</i> Scientist II – Genetic Resources and Food Security Policy Specialist Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT
15m	Next steps for the Working Group approval	<i>Francesca Grazioli</i> Scientist I – Value Chains and Markets Expert Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT
15m	Closing remarks	<i>Gloria Otieno</i> Scientist II – Genetic Resources and Food Security Policy Specialist Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT <i>Hamid El Bilali</i> Senior Researcher and Scientific Administrator Project Manager - SUSTLIVES International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM-Bari) <i>Filippo Acasto</i> Programme Coordinator- SUSTLIVES Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), Ouagadougou

Total duration: 2h45m

Note: While we have blocked 4 hours for this meeting, we have worked to streamline the agenda and anticipate the session will not exceed 3 hours.

Annex 2: List of Consultative Workshop Participants

Index No.	Institution	Number of participants	Country/Countries
1.	Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT	6	Italy, Uganda & Kenya
2.	International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies, CIHEAM-Bari	1	Italy
3.	Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), Ouagadougou	1	Burkina Faso
4.	Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA)/African Seed and Biotechnology Partnership Platform (ASBPP)	1	Ghana
5.	Community Technology Development Trust (CTDT)	1	Zimbabwe
6.	Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) - Uganda Country Secretariat	1	Uganda
7.	Genetic Resources Research Institute (GeRRI)/ Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO)	2	Kenya
8.	International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT)	1	Niger
9.	Slow Food International	2	Burkina Faso & Kenya
10.	Common Fund for Commodities	1	Netherlands
11.	African Orphan Crops Consortium (AOCC)/ Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF)	1	Kenya
12.	SWISSAID	1	Switzerland
13.	Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke)	1	Finland
14.	University Joseph KI-ZERBO	1	Burkina Faso
15.	Crop Trust	1	Germany
16.	National Plant Genetic Resources Center, Tanzania	1	Tanzania
17.	Italian National Research Council	1	Italy