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Scaling Opportunity Crops in Africa through a Multi-Stakeholder Platform: Aligning with Agenda 2063, Post-Malabo Commitments, and Global Policy Frameworks

Background

Opportunity crops—commonly known as *neglected and underutilized species (NUS)*—are deeply rooted in Africa's agricultural heritage. These biodiverse species, often adapted to harsh local environments and traditionally managed by communities using their indigenous knowledge, offer immense nutritional, economic, and ecological benefits. Despite their importance, they remain largely overlooked in agricultural policy, research, and market systems. These crops typically rely on informal seed systems with limited scientific breeding support. Their value chains are weak or non-existent, making it difficult for farmers to access viable markets. Compounding this is the minimal policy attention and investment allocated to NUS, which limits their potential to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

Yet, **revitalizing opportunity crops presents several transformative opportunities.** These species are naturally resilient to climate extremes and are suited to Africa's diverse agro-ecological zones. They contribute significantly to food and nutrition security through diverse, nutrient-rich diets; support poverty reduction through inclusive value chains; and empower women, who are often custodians of local knowledge and play central roles in managing and utilizing them.

Recognizing this untapped potential, the **SUSTLIVES project** (<https://www.sustlives.eu>)—implemented in Burkina Faso and Niger—seeks to promote the sustainable use of NUS by fostering research and innovation on NUS, strengthening seed systems,



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improving productivity, reinforcing value chains, and enabling supportive policies. The initiative is driven by a consortium of institutions, including AICS, CIHEAM-Bari, the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, University Roma Tre, Luke, CNR (Italy), local universities in Niger (University Abdou Moumouni) and Burkina Faso (University Joseph Ki-Zerbo), and grassroots NGOs. This collaborative model underscores the importance of multi-actor engagement in scaling solutions.

A **Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP) in the form of a working group on opportunity crops, under the African Seed and Biotechnology Platform (ASBP)**, can help coordinate, scale up, and mainstream opportunity crops across Africa, while aligning with continental frameworks such as the **Post-Malabo Declaration** and the **African Union's Agenda 2063**. A coordinated approach will foster innovation, policy coherence, investment, and inclusive development to enhance food and nutrition security, promote climate adaptation, and achieve long-term socio-economic goals.

The **Terms of Reference** for this multi-stakeholder platform, now renamed the **'African Opportunity Crops Working Group'**, were presented to stakeholders during

1 ASBP – Established under the African Union, the ASBP provides strategic guidance and coordination on seed policy harmonization, biotechnology development, and genetic resource management across the continent. The platform plays a critical role in advancing the goals of the Post-Malabo Declaration and Agenda 2063, especially in areas related to seed systems development, agricultural innovation, and regional trade in improved and locally adapted seeds.

an [online consultative workshop](#) in June 2025 and endorsed with minor revisions. The working group was officially launched on 1 September 2025 at the Africa Food Systems Forum in Dakar, Senegal.

Continental Policy Alignment for Scaling Opportunity Crops in Africa

The effort to scale opportunity crops in Africa aligns closely with two major continental policy frameworks: the **Post-Malabo Declaration (2025–2035)** and the **African Union's Agenda 2063**.

The **Post-Malabo Declaration**, building on the foundational commitments of the 2014 Malabo Declaration, sets a new vision for agricultural transformation in Africa over the next decade. It prioritizes the development of sustainable food systems, the promotion of climate-resilient agriculture, and a significant increase in investment in agricultural research and development. It also calls for nutrition-sensitive policies that address food and health challenges holistically, while reinforcing accountability mechanisms to track and report progress.

Scaling up opportunity crops—such as millet, sorghum, Bambara groundnut, and African Leafy Vegetables—aligns directly with these priorities. These crops

diversify food systems, enhance resilience to climate change, and contribute to improved nutrition outcomes, especially in vulnerable communities.

In parallel, the African Union's **Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want**, offers a long-term strategic blueprint for the continent's socio-economic transformation. The promotion and integration of opportunity crops contribute meaningfully to several of Agenda 2063's key goals, including:

- Goal 1:** Ending hunger and achieving food security through diversified and resilient food systems.
- Goal 3:** Ensuring healthy and well-nourished citizens by promoting access to nutrient-rich foods.
- Goal 5:** Advancing modern and productive agriculture that supports smallholder farmers and local economies.
- Goal 7:** Fostering inclusive economic growth and creating decent jobs, particularly in rural areas.
- Goal 13:** Building climate-resilient economies and communities, particularly through the use of locally adapted crops.

By aligning with these policy frameworks, the scaling of opportunity crops becomes a strategic pathway toward realizing Africa's collective development aspirations—both now and for future generations.

Further to this, the **Global Manifesto on Forgotten Foods** emerged in 2021 from an unprecedented, wide-ranging consultation across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. Facilitated by GFAiR; led by a coalition of Regional Research Organizations and their partners; and supported by CFF and the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, the manifesto was drafted with input from thousands of stakeholders—including farmers, youth, women's groups, civil society, researchers, and policymakers. The Manifesto calls for transformative action to reposition opportunity crops (i.e., forgotten foods) that are underutilized, and culturally rich species—at the heart of food systems. It demands a paradigm shift in research, governance, education, and innovation frameworks, placing smallholder farmers at the center as custodians and co-creators of knowledge. The document aligns with key Sustainable Development Goals and champions the human rights to food and health, and it informed global policy conversations, including at the UN Food Systems Summit. The manifesto further calls for uniting diverse stakeholders around opportunity crops as a catalyst for food system transformation.



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More recently, the **African Common Position on Food Systems** emphasizes the strategic role of opportunity crops—in achieving resilient, diverse, nutritious, and equitable food systems. Building on frameworks like Agenda 2063 and CAADP-Malabo, the AU Common Position on Food Systems is calling for increased investment in research, seed systems, and value chain development for such crops to enhance climate resilience, nutrition security, and local livelihoods. Opportunity crops are seen not only as tools for improving food and dietary diversity but also as levers

for empowering smallholder farmers, preserving agrobiodiversity, and reducing dependence on a narrow set of staples. The Common Position advocates for supportive policies, regulatory reforms, and regional cooperation to more effectively integrate opportunity crops into national food system pathways—ensuring that seed production, quality, market access, and nutrition outcomes are aligned. In so doing, Africa aims to realize a food system transformation that is both locally rooted and globally relevant, capable of responding to climate shocks and dietary needs in a sustainable, inclusive manner.

Leveraging Global Policy Frameworks to Unlock the Potential of Opportunity Crops

Taking cognizance of the **International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA)**, opportunity crops provide a critical entry point for realizing the obligations outlined in Articles 5, 7, and 9.

Article 5 calls on Parties to promote the conservation, exploration, collection, characterization, evaluation, and documentation of plant genetic resources.

Opportunity crops—often neglected yet highly adapted to local agro-ecologies—fit squarely within this mandate, as their conservation and use are essential to maintaining agricultural biodiversity.

Article 7 further requires Parties to integrate the sustainable use of plant genetic resources into national agricultural policies. Supporting opportunity crops through research, seed system development, and value chain integration directly advances this goal by diversifying production systems, enhancing resilience to climate change, and improving nutrition. **Article 9 enshrines Farmers' Rights**, including the rights to save, use, exchange, and sell farm-saved seed, as well as to participate in decision-making and benefit-sharing.

Promoting opportunity crops within this framework strengthens farmers' roles as custodians of biodiversity while ensuring equitable access to resources and benefits. Together, these provisions create a strong legal and policy foundation for elevating opportunity crops from marginalized species to central elements of resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food systems.

Finally, opportunity crops are levers for advancing the **UNFSS Action Tracks**. They improve nutrition by providing diverse, micronutrient-rich foods, while encouraging **sustainable consumption** through culturally appropriate and plant-based diets. Their climate resilience and low-input requirements make them central to **nature-positive production**, conserving agrobiodiversity and ecosystem services. By creating new market opportunities and value chains, particularly for women and youth, opportunity crops advance equitable livelihoods and inclusive economic growth. Finally, their adaptability to marginal environments strengthens **resilience** to climate shocks, economic disruptions, and food supply vulnerabilities.

Opportunity Crops as a Catalyst: Stakeholders in Food System Change

In May 2025, a stakeholder survey was conducted across **21 African countries with 67 respondents (Figure 1)**. The survey highlights strong and growing engagement in research and development initiatives around **opportunity crops**. Over **30 projects** have been implemented in the past five years, underscoring increasing recognition of opportunity crops as vital for climate resilience, nutrition security, and diversified livelihoods.

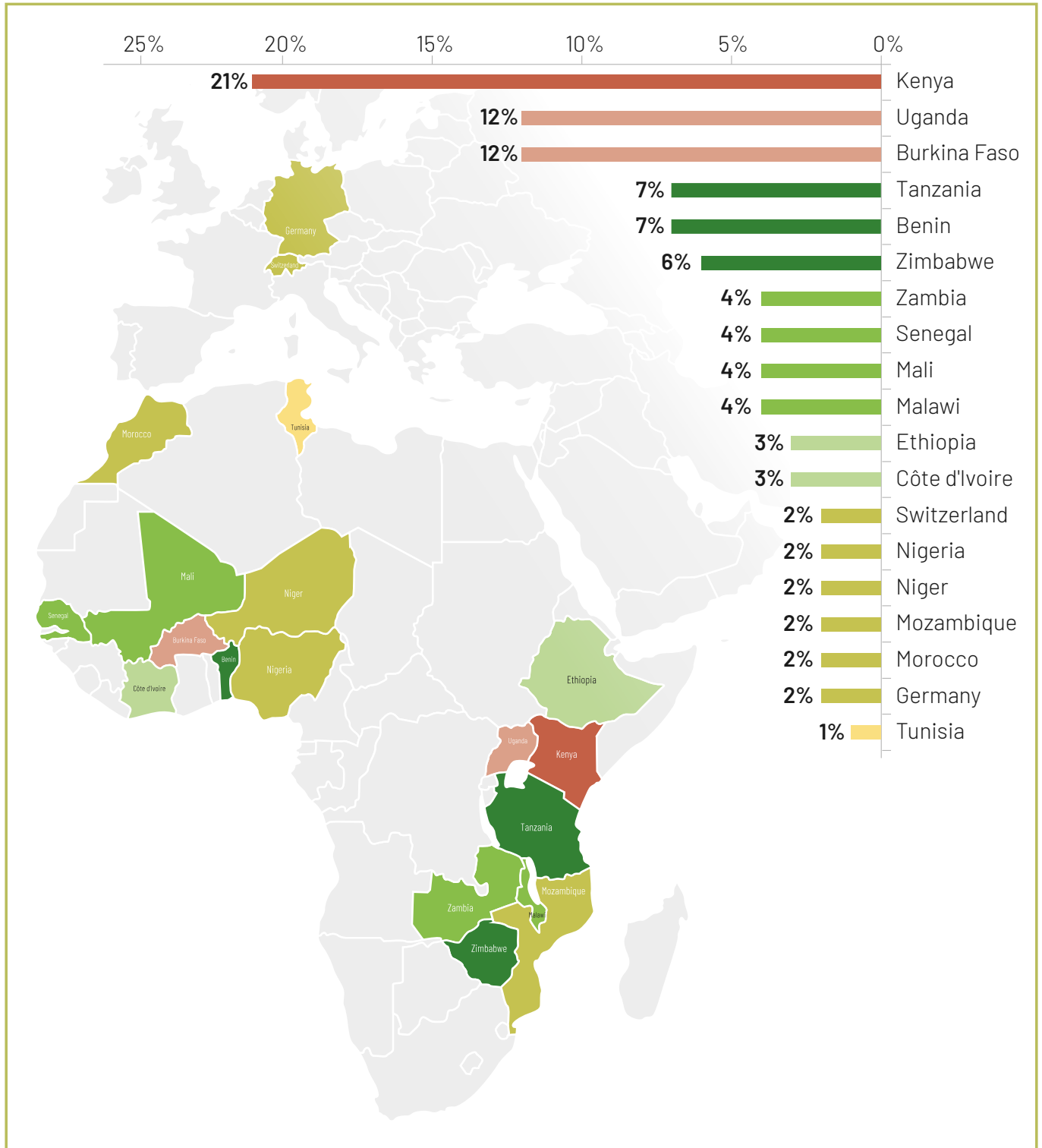


Figure 1. Geographical distribution of survey respondents.

Respondents identified projects spanning conservation, seed systems, value chain development, and policy advocacy, reflecting a broad scope of action within the continent (**Figure 2**).

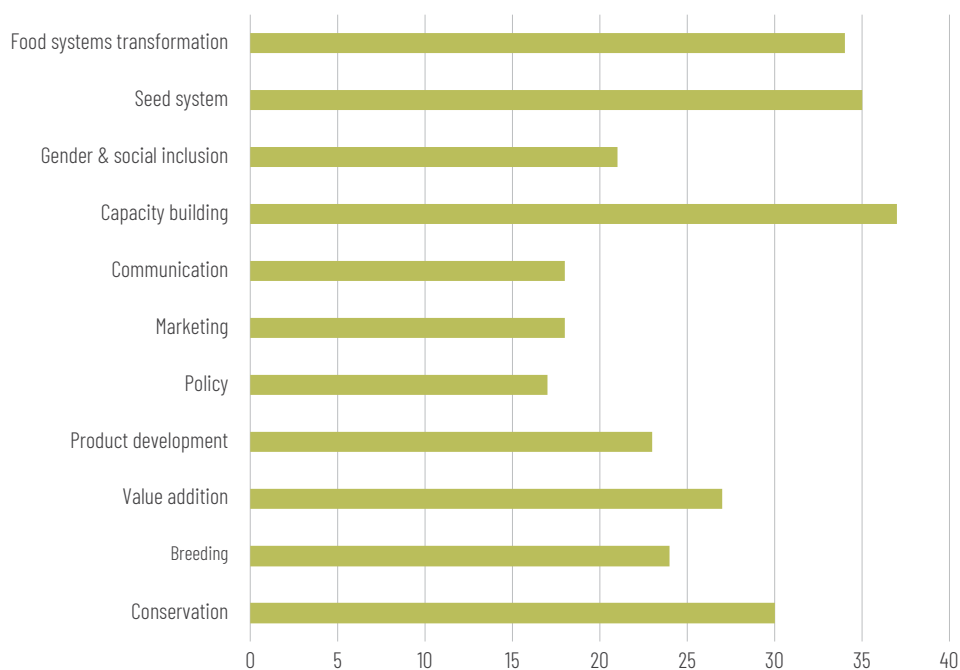


Figure 2. Scope of R&D activities on opportunity crops in Africa.

Emerging from the survey points out the importance of **multi-country dialogue and synergies**. Stakeholders emphasized the need to strengthen inter-country and international collaboration to accelerate scaling of initiatives focused on opportunity crops. An analysis of stakeholders' responses reveals that the majority (79%) support engaging other actors through a regional multi-stakeholder platform, 63% favor the establishment of national stakeholder forums, and 59% prefer communities of practice as a means of engaging with other stakeholders (**Figure 3**). These findings point to the necessity of structured platforms and coordination mechanisms to link local innovations with regional and global policy processes, ensuring that opportunity crops are integrated more systematically into Africa's food and nutrition strategies.

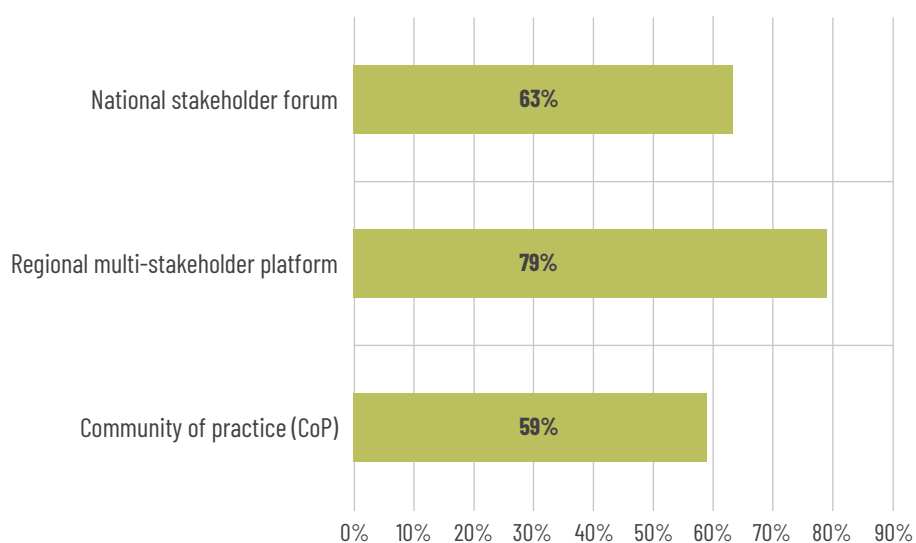
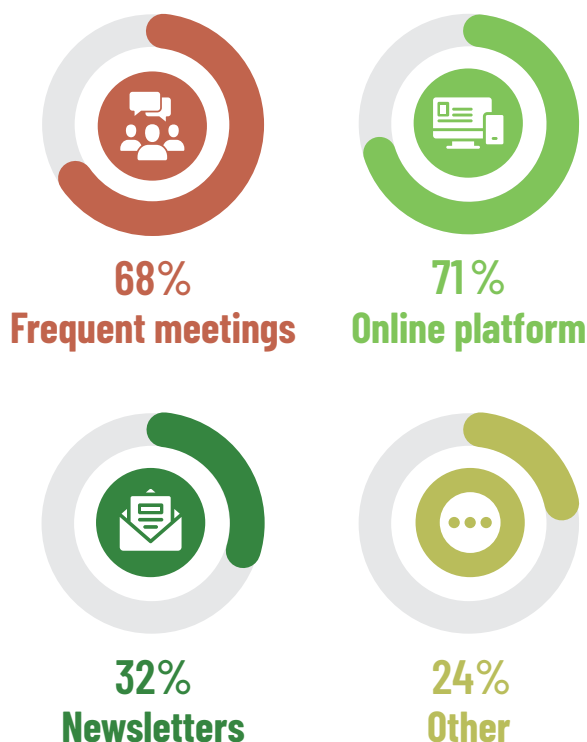


Figure 3. Ways participants prefer to collaborate to accelerate scaling of initiatives focused on opportunity crops.

Ways in which stakeholders would like to engage with the working group



The Working Group on Opportunity Crops

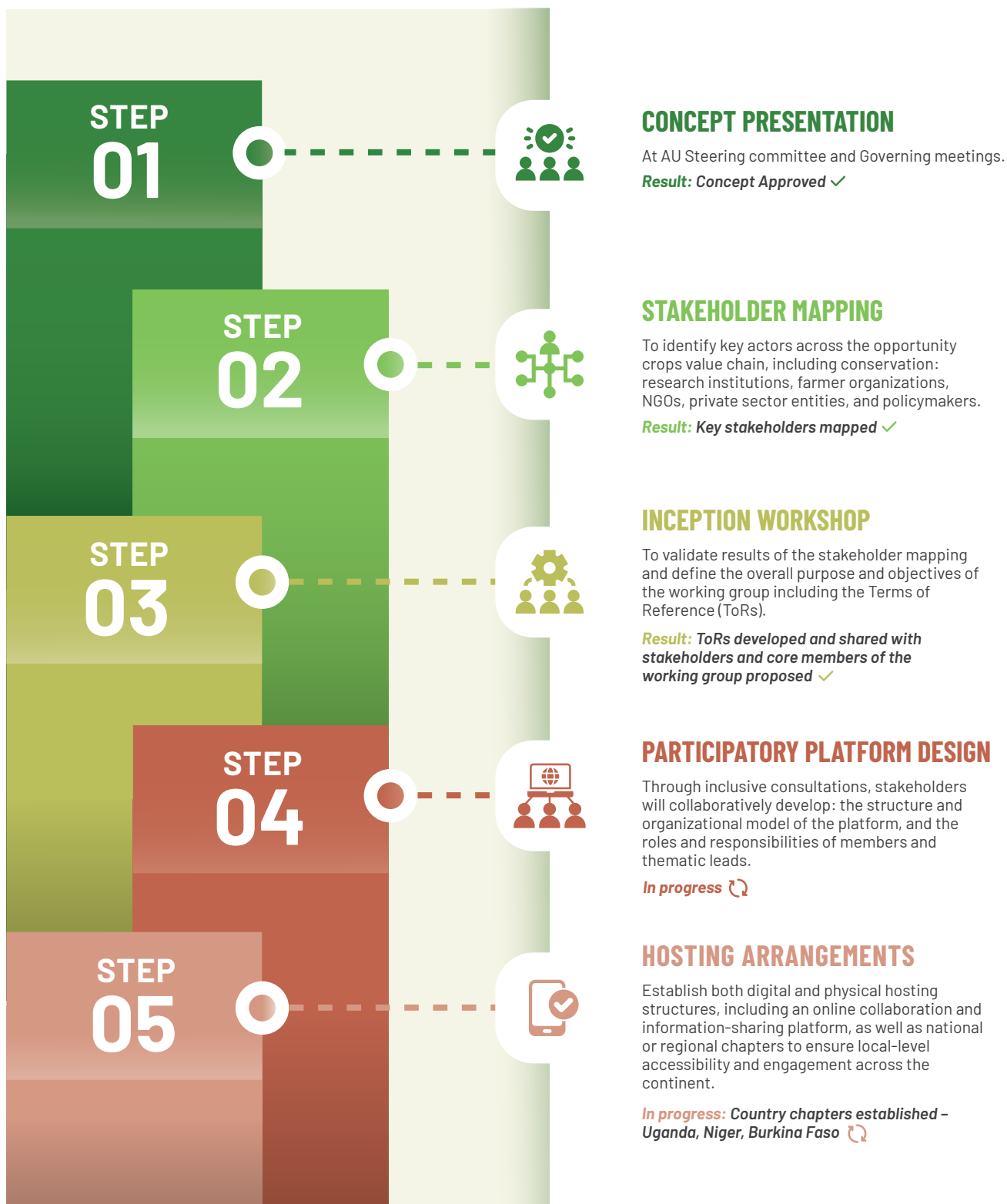
The strategic goals of the working group are multifaceted. First, it will serve as a **knowledge and innovation hub**, facilitating the exchange of research findings, scalable technologies, and best practices across the continent. Second, it will engage the private sector to **promote entrepreneurship and attract investment** into products and value chains of opportunity crops. Third, the platform will **support advocacy efforts** aimed at closing institutional and regulatory gaps that hinder seed system development for opportunity crops, their production, and market integration.

A crucial function of the working group will also be to promote the role of opportunity crops in **enhancing food security in fragile contexts**. Additionally, it will advance gender inclusion by **embedding gender-sensitive approaches** into all activities, ensuring that women have equitable access to resources, training, and leadership roles within the opportunity crops ecosystem.

Effective governance will be the cornerstone of scaling opportunity crops across Africa. Fragmented initiatives and scattered investments have long limited the visibility and impact of these species. The working group offers a **structured mechanism to harmonize efforts**—bringing together governments, regional bodies, research institutions, farmers' organizations, civil society, and the private sector under one coordinated framework. By setting clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms, the platform can reduce duplication, foster complementarity, and ensure that investments translate into measurable outcomes. Ensuring transparent governance will be essential for mobilizing resources and building stakeholder trust, paving the way for opportunity crops to shift from the margins and become central to Africa's agricultural transformation.

The working group will also act as a **communications platform**—disseminating success stories, research results, and innovations through newsletters, social media, and key regional and international policy forums such as the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA), the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA).

The operationalization of the working group involved a phased roadmap as follows:



Once launched, the platform will focus on implementing an action plan with clearly defined outcomes, indicators, and timelines. It will continually document lessons learned and adapt to new challenges and opportunities, ensuring relevance and sustainability.

Policy Recommendations

Given these developments, several **policy recommendations** are proposed. Policymakers and partners are urged to support the working group with both financial and technical resources. Critical to the success of this working group is **resource mobilization and pooling** to ensure we achieve continental goals set out in the Post Malabo declaration and Agenda 2063 as well as achieving commitments made by countries under the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

National governments should **integrate opportunity crops into agricultural research and development strategies**, including National Agricultural Investment Plans (NAIPs). The private sector should be incentivized to invest in opportunity crops' value chains, from input supply to processing and retail. Importantly, women's participation and leadership must be prioritized throughout these efforts, recognizing their central role in opportunity crops management. Lastly, opportunity crops should be recognized in climate adaptation and food security policies at national, regional, and continental levels.

Mainstreaming opportunity crops also represents a pathway to greater gender equity in African food systems. Women are often the primary custodians of local crop diversity, yet they remain marginalized in formal agricultural systems and markets. Centering women's participation in research, extension, and policy frameworks around opportunity crops is therefore not only a matter of fairness but also of efficiency: evidence shows that when women have greater access to resources and decision-making power, household nutrition and community resilience improve. The working group should **champion gender-responsive approaches**, ensuring training, financing, and leadership opportunities explicitly target women and youth, while recognizing and elevating their traditional knowledge as a valuable resource for climate adaptation.

The establishment of the working group on opportunity crops represents a timely and strategic mechanism for coordinating efforts to unlock the full potential of opportunity crops in Africa. Aligned with the **Post-Malabo Declaration and Agenda 2063**, this working group embodies Africa's commitment to inclusive, resilient, and nutrition-sensitive food systems that leave no one behind.



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