Transitioning Farming Systems for Resilience and Food Security in Malawi

Successful Stakeholders' Workshop Promotes South-South Collaboration

January 4, 2025

A two-day Stakeholders' Workshop on Sustainable Transitioning of Farming Systems, held on 12-13 December 2024 at the Sunbird Capital Hotel in Lilongwe, brought together key agricultural stakeholders, researchers, policymakers, and development partners to explore solutions to enhance the resilience and sustainability of Malawi's mixed farming systems.

Organized by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (**ICRISAT**) under the CGIAR Initiative on Sustainable Intensification of Mixed Farming Systems (**SI-MFS**), the event highlighted critical pathways for improving productivity, resilience, and food security in southern Africa's agricultural sector.

Malawi's agriculture sector is a cornerstone of its economy, contributing nearly 25% of GDP and employing over 60% of the population. Despite significant investment, productivity remains well below potential, particularly within the mixed farming systems that rely heavily on maize production.

Factors such as climate change, erratic weather, and limited adoption of sustainable practices have compounded these challenges, leaving smallholder farmers vulnerable and hindering overall agricultural growth.

Dr Stanford Blade, Director General-Interim and Deputy Director General-Research at ICRISAT, emphasized the urgency of addressing these challenges.

"In the face of climate variability and increasing food demands, transforming Malawi's farming systems towards greater resilience and sustainability is non-negotiable. This workshop has provided a vital platform for collaboration, allowing us to co-create solutions that support both food security and economic stability for Malawian farmers," asserted Dr Blade.

Dr Shalander Kumar, Cluster Leader for Markets, Institutions and Policy at ICRISAT, shares research findings, highlighting data as instrumental in strengthening the capacity of national partners to scale up technology adoption.

The workshop focused on fostering knowledge exchange around systems approaches that promote the sustainable intensification of mixed farming. Leveraging expertise from CGIAR institutions, including the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), and the ICAR-Indian Institute of Maize Research, participants engaged in robust discussions on practical, context-specific strategies to overcome barriers to sustainability in Malawi's agriculture.

Dr Grace Kaudzu, Director of Agricultural Research Services for the Government of Malawi, underscored the importance of collective action in driving change:

"The adoption of sustainable farming practices is critical to the future of Malawi's agriculture. This workshop has been a key opportunity for the government, researchers, and development partners to align our efforts and invest in strategies that will improve the resilience of farmers, promote sustainable production, and ultimately ensure long-term food security," **shared Dr Kaudzu.**

During the two-day event, participants explored integrated solutions to the challenges facing Malawi's predominantly maize-based mixed farming systems. Modern systems frameworks and tools were demonstrated to co-design contextual solutions for sustainable intensification, integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

A key takeaway from the event was the urgent need for coordinated efforts between research institutions, policymakers, and the private sector to strengthen the policy, practice, and research frameworks necessary for a sustainable transition.

Dr Martin Moyo leads the call for a collaborative approach to transforming mixed farming systems.

Dr Martin Moyo, Principal Scientist-Farming and Systems Analysis and Cluster Leader for Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Sciences at ICRISAT, called for a collaborative approach to addressing challenges in African food systems.

"We are at a critical juncture where decisive action is needed to ensure the sustainability of Malawi's farming systems. By facilitating dialogue among all stakeholders, we aim to

identify the most effective solutions that can boost productivity, reduce risks, and improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers," said Dr Moyo.

The workshop concluded with a commitment to co-design a roadmap for future research and development (R4D) projects aimed at enhancing the resilience and profitability of smallholder farming systems in Malawi.

Dr ML Jat, ICRISAT's Research Program Director for Resilient Farm and Food Systems and Lead Focal Point of SI-MFS, engaged participants in discussions on mechanisms to foster long-term multi-stakeholder collaboration, which will be essential for supporting the sustainable intensification of agriculture in the region.

Event outcomes included the identification of practical policy and practice guidelines, which will feed into Malawi's agricultural development strategies. Additionally, participants agreed on the need for strengthened multi-stakeholder coordination to ensure that sustainable farming practices are widely adopted across the country.

The CGIAR Initiative on SI-MFS seeks to provide solutions for the sustainable intensification of mixed farming systems in sub-Saharan Africa. The initiative focuses on enhancing food security, improving climate resilience, and promoting environmentally sustainable practices across diverse farming landscapes.

This work aligns with SDGs 2, 13 & 17.