

Acknowledgement

Organizing Committee

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Scientific Committee

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Markets and trade

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Strategy for banana in Africa

What does it take to transform a crop that is part of the agricultural and cultural landscape into an engine of economic development? Bananas in their diverse forms – sweet dessert fruit, starchy cooking bananas, juicing bananas and plantains – originate from Asia. However, people have been growing them in Africa for more than two thousand years – very much longer than maize or cassava, for instance. Nobody knows who brought bananas to Africa or exactly when but in this new home they have certainly been adopted with enthusiasm. People in the highlands of Central Africa eat more bananas than anyone else in the world while in the lowlands of the Congo basin farmers grow a greater diversity of plantains than anywhere else. These tough perennial plants are the backbone of many farming systems, protecting the soil from erosion and surviving floods, drought and civil conflict, to recover quickly and provide people with food when they need it most. In their different forms, bananas can be a starchy staple, an energy-giving snack or an easily digestible weaning food for babies.

Yet in many ways the market for bananas grown in Africa is still in its infancy. It is true that trucks laden with banana and plantain are a familiar sight on the highways leading into many of Africa's major cities, providing a significant income for farmers in the hinterland and for the traders who link them to markets. Ships laden with dessert fruit leave ports on the West African coast and the Horn of Africa, contributing to the balance of trade and providing employment on plantations and in packing sheds. Meanwhile, all across the continent, people are transforming bananas into higher value, more durable products – chips and other snack foods, flour, and beverages – that can be sold into markets nearby and traded overseas. Artefacts woven from banana leaves and fibre provide useful and decorative objects, around homes in the local community or sold to tourists and craft shops in other continents.

Most stakeholders in the banana sector, however, recognise that this is only a beginning, a small fraction of what bananas could contribute to sustainable development in Africa. What is limiting the economic dynamism of the banana sector in Africa? Are key technologies lacking at particular stages in the commodity chain, from genetic resources, through production, post-harvest handling and processing to consumption? Are suitable technologies available, but is knowledge of them and supporting information failing to reach farmers and other intermediaries in the commodity chain? Do farmers, processors and traders have the necessary business skills and market information to allow them to enter and compete in an evolving and ever-more-competitive market? Are input supplies and other infrastructures adequate to support a flourishing banana sector? Do national policy and regulatory environments facilitate and encourage the development of markets and trade?

The intention of the 'strategy day' is to draw together the most important lessons learned from the first three days of the conference, to analyze and synthesize them into a coherent 'road map' which will help to guide the development of the banana sector in Africa. Drawing on the richness of experience and expertise available, the meeting will use participatory approaches to draw out specific recommendations for each major production system and type of market orientation. What needs to be done, how can this be achieved, with whom, when and where, in order for the banana sector to make its full contribution to the well-being of people and the sustainable economic development of Africa? Working together, this unique gathering of experts will seek to provide authoritative answers to these questions and so chart the way ahead for all stakeholders in this important endeavour.