



Accelerating sustainable agri-impact across Africa

Written by

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Collaboration is a catalyst for change. Seeking out and developing new partnerships to reach more farmers, introduce and expand the adoption of cutting-edge technologies and sustainable practices across Africa food systems can unlock prosperous outcomes for farmers, food security and planet health. Guided by this belief, at UPL we established the Partnerships for Sustainability (P4S) initiative in 2019 as an implementation body to foster meaningful collaboration and pool ideas, innovation, and techniques, and get them into the hands of farmers that need them – in the most practical and uplifting way possible.

Monitoring and reporting are also crucial vehicles for continued improvement, growth, and elevating

sustainability performance. They provide a holistic view of a company's reach and impact, and hold individuals and entities accountable to their vision, commitments, and targets. Whilst in some rural, remote and technologically disconnected parts of the world, collating information and data can be challenging, companies who focus on obtaining such insights will be able to better serve the farmers and help enhance food systems.

In June 2022, we launched our inaugural 'Africa Sustainability Report', showcasing our work over 2021-2022 to further improve the environment and social performance of agricultural networks across the continent. As the first agribusiness to dedicate a standalone sustainability report for

operations across Africa, we set out to champion stories of farmer resilience, innovation, and stewardship – and encourage the rest of the industry to share in our commitment to driving a sustainable food systems transformation across Africa, rooted in data.

The report focuses on five key pillars that we believe are critical for the resilience, prosperity, and sustainability of agriculture across Africa: Stewardship and training, technology, food chain, partnerships and OpenHearts (our community engagement purpose). Our ambition is that reporting across these pillars will help us achieve our sustainability objectives, improve our value offering for growers, and impact more farming communities across the continent.



(left) Farmer with a bag of SWARNA2, a hybrid seed variety for rice; (right) Stewardship training session in Mali



Pillar 1: Stewardship and training

Despite currently lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of crop yields per hectare, Africa holds immense agricultural potential. For instance, the Sub-Saharan region has a quarter of the world's arable land and yet only produces 10% of global agricultural output. With a growing population that is expected to reach 1.5 bn by 2025, there is an urgent need for Africa to boost its agricultural productivity if it is to meet local demand and become self-sufficient. With more than half of Africa's labour force working in agriculture, there is significant potential for the continent to become the world's food basket.

To unlock this potential, farmers need to be able to access the right technologies, and then safely and effectively use them to get the most out of their natural production systems. We are witnessing first-hand the misuse of crop protection technologies and lack of awareness among rural populations. We consider it is our duty as a global leader of the agriculture sector to be a stewardship trailblazer. We have seen that if correctly supported, farmers can and want to grow more sustainably, adopt Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs),

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and use products efficiently. We have a responsibility to be that source of help.

UPL made "Stewardship and Training" one of the key pillars of the Africa Sustainability Report to illustrate that technical capacity building is the cornerstone of a thriving agricultural sector. From training programmes in GAPs, to climate-smart farming techniques and best-in-class stewardship programs, it is important to ensure that growers have the knowledge as well as the tools needed to improve their sustainable productivity and resilience.

Pillar 2: Technology

As the world needs to feed a growing population whilst significantly reducing its impact on the environment, the agriculture industry is increasingly adopting new technologies that add value to the entire food chain and reinvent our production practices - from hybrid seeds and biosolutions

to mobile applications and anti-waste technologies. In Africa, these innovations are also helping foster farmer resilience, ensuring that they can grow healthy crops in the face of emerging threats such as destructive pests and forces of climate change, and giving them access to more valuable markets.

We believe biosolutions represent the next frontier of technological advancement. Biosolutions, naturally derived inputs, offer compelling potential across Africa to reduce crop residues, improve resistance management against pests and diseases, enhance yields and climate resilience, boost overall crop quality – all whilst protecting farms, forests, and fields.

Improving and maintaining soil health also forms a key part of our work with growers across Africa. As the bedrock of agriculture, our soils ensure that crops can grow strong and resilient in the face of a changing climate, so it is critical to treat them with utmost care. Leading technologies that reinforce



(Top left) Kenyan female tomato farmer; (Top right) Women in agriculture training session; (Bottom left) Stewardship program 'Galela Kakuhle' in South Africa; (Bottom right) Sorghum farmers in South Africa

soil structure, health, and life, improve nutrient and water uptake, and are paving the way towards more resilient and sustainable production systems. We have also seen an emergence of mobile applications which are helping farmers access essential information across weather prediction, pest control, input purchase and output markets. Furthermore, we've seen artificial intelligence-based apps come to market which provide real-time diagnoses of plant diseases or pests in the field, enabling farmers to provide targeted treatment to affected plants and prevent their entire crop being wiped out.

Whilst these technologies are becoming increasingly sophisticated, more progress is needed to improve access and affordability of these innovations for smallholder farmers across Africa.

Pillar 3: Food Chain

The combined shock of locked borders during Covid-19, and the rising prices following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has highlighted major weaknesses in the African food chain and the continent's over-reliance on imports despite having a favourable

growing climate and abundant arable land. In 2020, nearly two thirds of African countries were net importers of basic food while the number of hungry people has risen to around 250 mn people – roughly one fifth of the continent's population.

For instance, countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Mali, and Sierra Leone – which historically enjoyed the benefits of not only self-sufficiency, but surplus – are now reliant on Asia for 40-50% of rice imports.

Establishing and enabling the development of strong local food chains is one of the best drivers of food

security and farmer prosperity. To lead a food systems transformation, one must look across the different pain points and requirements facing every stakeholder of the food chain – from small and medium size growers to processors, retailers, and customers, as well as public authorities. To be effective, technologies and solutions must then be value-chain trialed and tested and introduced via integrated projects led hand-in-hand with local off-takers, manufacturers or traders who represent a force for positive change as they drive quality demand for small farmers.

Collaboration with national government and civil society authorities are also essential for an efficient and effective food systems development. The African Union Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) for example offers a clear roadmap to boost investment and stimulate growth – as a central player in the agriculture sector it is our role to provide adequate technical support and technologies for serving these regional and national objectives of economic development and food self-sufficiency.

Pillar 4: Partnerships

Africa's food autonomy, adaptation to climate change, and growing demand, cannot be solved in one day nor by a single solution or actor. There are a lot of initiatives on the continent seeking to contribute to the achievement of SDGs. We believe that public-private and cross-sector partnerships are catalysts for change, the impact of which can be even more profound in a developing world region such as Africa.

Sustaining and scaling agricultural advancement is contingent on strong coordination and synergy – and through partnership we can better align government priorities, private sector interests, and level-up meaningful interventions and impact for smallholder farming communities.

At UPL, we have fostered partnerships with government entities, investors, digital partners, off-takers,

development finance institutions, research institutions, and farmer alliances, amongst others, in order to reach more farmers and provide them with a full-service and integrated offering. For instance, alongside our ongoing partnership with Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), we are also the only agri-inputs signatory to the Cocoa and Forests Initiative (CFI), member of the World Cocoa Foundation and of the ECOWAS Rice Observatory – combining our commitment with the dedicated efforts of other agri-stakeholders to change the game for farming communities. Building on these successes, and with the establishment of P4S, our network of partnerships will only continue to strengthen and scale as we further our mission to impact the lives of farmers and catalyse adoption of sustainable technologies.

Pillar 5: OpenHearts

When we think of growth, we must ensure that it brings about benefits that can not only be enjoyed by the farmer, but also the rural community at large. OpenHearts is our community engagement mission - a commitment to go beyond business practice to uplift the communities in which we operate through enhancing social infrastructure and service provision – spanning education, healthcare and sanitation.

Responsible agriculture can play a progressive role in the sustainable development of emerging economies, and the private sector has a responsibility to be a reliable partner to the communities in which it operates, empowering women, youths, farming families and beyond to embrace a prosperous future.

Community engagement and ensuring that everyone benefits from new opportunities and growth is a key driver of our OpenHearts pillar. At UPL we're delivering socio-economic development impact opportunities in Africa that is helping the most vulnerable populations access essential health care services. In 2020 we partnered with The Heart Fund to implement a second cardiac mobile clinic in the Cote d'Ivoire. Through this partnership we have successfully carried out 11 prevention and screening campaigns, offering 3,641 cardiology and imaging consultations. We have a responsibility to ensure that our work makes a lasting impact that contributes to the improved health and socio-economic development that extends beyond crops and farmers.

Driving continued growth

Across African agriculture, there are a lot of gaps to fill, a lot of opportunities to seize, and a lot of challenges to address. We believe the best way of assessing these and driving positive transformation is through analysing, monitoring, and reporting. In order to effectively evolve our service offering and accelerate positive transformation across these sustainability pillars over the coming years, it is important that we share our insights, and target areas for progress. Private sector companies are not only accountable to their investors, but also to their farmers, and in order to better serve our growers and elevate our ESG performance, we must collectively and transparently share our activities and actions to encourage ourselves and our peers to continue to do better and achieve more. ■

UPL Ltd. is a global provider of sustainable agriculture products and solutions, with a presence in more than 138 countries globally. As one of the top 5 agricultural solutions companies worldwide, our robust portfolio consists of biologicals and traditional crop protection solutions with over 14,000 registrations. UPL has been active across the African continent for over 30 years and is currently the largest distributor of biosolutions and integrated offers adapted to African cropping conditions.

You can read UPL's first Africa Sustainability Report at www.upl-ltd.com