



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

MAINSTREAM

Mission-oriented agrifood innovation systems for sustainability transition through agroecology



OBJECTIVES

Many countries in the world, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa, have started developing national strategies for sustainability transition through agroecology, linked to regional and global initiatives. However, investments in agroecology science, technology and innovation (STI) remain modest, and limited and fragmented capacities in this field make collaboration and coordination within agrifood innovation systems challenging. Locally tested innovations are not sufficiently scaled because of bottlenecks (capacity gaps, lack of market development, enabling policies and investments) linked to outdated innovation diffusion strategies.

To operationalise agroecology principles, a shift is needed towards innovation approaches that place rural communities at the centre, within a conducive policy mix and effective collaboration at various levels. The project expected impact is to enhance sustainable agrifood systems and farmers livelihoods, contributing to relevant SDG targets in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions. MAINSTREAM will contribute to this main objective by leveraging co-created, youth and gender-transformative innovation scaling support services and improved policymaking capacities, centered on country needs and community-driven innovation. The project specific objectives are:

- **To include** validated and co-created strategic roadmaps to scale community-driven innovations for sustainability transitions through agroecology in existing national agroecology strategies and policies;
- **To deploy** nexus-driven and demand-driven regional innovation scaling hubs in thematic areas relevant for agroecological transitions, delivering support services to key scaling actors (innovation communities, innova-

tion facilitators, institutional and financing actors, innovative agripreneurs);

- **To mobilise** the FAO Global Innovation Hub to foster collective learning and elaboration of common frameworks for innovation scaling, integrate regional hubs into inter-continental innovation networks, promote stakeholder engagement and outreach on mission-oriented agricultural innovation systems for sustainability transitions through agroecology.



LOGIC OF INTERVENTION

MAINSTREAM combines three levels of intervention: country, regional and global levels.

At country level, in at least three champion countries equipped with agroecology strategies, the project will support the deployment of mission-oriented agrifood innovation systems (MAIS), through multi-stakeholder co-creative Innovation Policy Labs (IPLs), focused on critical innovation areas, for activating sustainability transition through agroecology, jointly identified with governments and relevant MAIS stakeholders, that will be then stress-tested through selected pilots. The project will co-construct new operational models as part of co-developed innovation roadmaps in support of national agroecology strategies, and in synergy with similar on-going programmes and initiatives in each country. These will be supported by capacity development interventions, the mobilisation of innovative financing strategies aligned with national priorities and programmes, and with a specific attention to youth, women and Indigenous peoples as key innovators and change makers for sustainability transition.

To support shifts in countries in their agrifood innovation systems and unlock the scaling of promising com-

munity-driven innovation niches, 'regional innovation scaling ecosystems' will be strengthened by regional hubs composed of a network of at least four partner hub organisations (PHOs) operating in the champion countries. The hubs will support the co-creation and scaling of innovation portfolios at regional level, combining transnational co-incubation networks, multi-stakeholder governance platforms, and policy advocacy coalitions around sector-specific technical innovations in critical areas for sustainability transitions (e.g. small-scale mechanisation, biofertilisers, market gardening, solutions at the nexus food-water-energy).

PHOs will organise the joint design and delivery of a set of three core support services and the coordination between support service providers from different countries, promoting open and responsible social innovation principles. The three core support services consist in:

- **Envision:** support to regional innovation ecosystems' stakeholders to envision transition pathways and associated critical innovation portfolios;
- **Empower:** train professionals in innovation leadership, facilitation and management to support multi-stakeholder innovation partnerships and the design of tailored scaling strategies;
- **Unlock:** for a selected set of innovation portfolios, foster innovation scaling through mission-led multi-actor collaboration, cross-niche learning, sectoral cross-pollination, strategic coordination across scales, and matchmaking with regional policies and financing opportunities.

The regional innovation ecosystems' scaling hubs will benefit from global coordination and support to leverage the power of the international R&I community with a shared interest in sustainability transitions based on agroecology principles. Task forces, workshops and knowledge repository will be organised to pull collective learning from theory and from practice together into a set of common frameworks, tools, guidance on open and responsible social innovation, MAIS and innovation scaling to be used by PHOs, IPLs and capacity development at country level in different regions of the world.



MAIN INTERVENTIONS/COMPONENTS

Component 1 - Strategic and actionable roadmaps on innovation for agroecological transition co-constructed in each country. Innovation Policy Labs will be implemented in countries, based on demands, engaging farmers (including women, youth) and Indigenous peoples, farmer organisations, research institutions, and advisory services as key stakeholders in participatory policymaking in the domain of innovation support. Simultaneously, government capacities will be strengthened to effectively incorporate scientific evidence, data-driven insights, and social considerations into policy decisions.

Component 2 - Regional innovation scaling hubs developed and serving national and regional innovation actors and processes for agroecological transition. To support the development and functioning of regional innovation scaling ecosystems on AET, MAINSTREAM will organise and support a network of partner hub organisations (PHOs), organised as Regional Innovation Scaling Hubs, serving both English- and French-speaking sub-regions. The PHOs will be in charge of delivering three unique core support services to countries and innovation communities to scale most promising innovations for agroecological transitions.

Component 3 - Global Innovation Hub for collective learning and outreach on mission-oriented AIS for sustainability transition through AE operational. International Thematic Task forces will be set up to co-create and share knowledge and resources to feed the work of innovation policy labs and regional hubs' services, with a specific focus on frameworks and tools dedicated to the support of community-driven innovation and ecosystem-based scaling and financing strategies based on open social and responsible innovation principles.



STATE OF PLAY OF THE PROJECT

The project was signed mid-September and is being operationalised. Global level activities and partner mobilisation have just started. The launch of the project has been announced during the Science & Innovation Forum, FAO HQ, 12-17 October, 2025.

BASIC INFORMATION

Contracting entity: FAO

Implementing partners: FAO (Office of Innovation and country offices) and AIS actors in research and education: government agencies and institutions, stakeholder platforms and agriculture extension and advisory services, business and enterprise including farmers organisations, private sector and other value chain actors and organisations, incubators and other innovation scaling hubs or facilities, NGOs and civil society organisations.

Countries: Global. Regional innovation scaling hubs will be located in Senegal, Kenya and Zimbabwe.

Start: September 2025.

Duration: 5 years.

Funding: The 6M€ project is funded by the European Union.