

Why Africa cannot afford another lost decade in food systems

As 2025 draws to a close, Africa stands at a defining crossroads for its food systems. The continent is preparing to embark on a new 10-year journey under the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and the Kampala Declaration (2026–2035). This moment demands reflection not as an academic exercise, but as a reckoning with what the next decade must deliver. The conversation can no longer be about promises. It must be about results.

The significance of this transition lies in its timing and intent. After years of continental declarations and national commitments, Africa's food systems agenda is shifting from aspiration to consequence. What matters now is not what is written in strategy documents, but what is financed, implemented, and felt in the daily lives of citi-

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zens. Results must therefore become the defining language of the next decade.

On December 4, an online engagement brought together food and nutrition stakeholders from 13 African countries to reflect on the commitments made under CAADP. The discussion underscored a shared understanding: the decisions taken in the coming years will shape not only agricultural performance, but Africa's broader development trajectory.

CAADP offers a unique and ambitious vision. It positions agriculture not merely as a sector, but as a system, one that connects production, nutrition, climate resilience, markets, jobs, and economic growth. It calls for the domestication of continental commitments into national and regional frameworks, backed by stronger accountability. If implemented as intended, CAADP has the potential to transform food systems into a powerful engine for inclusive growth over the next decade.

However, the greatest test of

the Kampala Declaration will be financing. Mobilising public resources, attracting private investment, and unlocking climate finance for agri-food systems remain persistent challenges. The economic case is already well established. For every dollar invested in agri-food systems, the return can be as high as 23 dollars. A single dollar invested in school meals can generate up to nine dollars in combined benefits across education, health, and income. These are not social costs; they are investments in productivity, human capital, and long-term growth.

Yet despite this evidence, agri-food systems, and nutrition in particular have remained chronically underfunded. Transformation cannot occur when food systems sit at the margins of national budgets. Nutrition continues to be treated as a social expense rather than the high-return investment it is. This must change in the next decade.

Climate finance will also be decisive. Africa's food systems are increasingly vulnerable to climate shocks, yet they receive only a fraction of global climate financing. The next decade must prioritise climate finance tailored specifically to agri-food systems. Large-scale adaptation investments such as irrigation infrastructure, early warning systems, and resilient livelihoods are no longer optional. They are essential, especially for the most vulnerable communities who bear the brunt of climate impacts.

Equally important is where and how investments are made. Too often, Africa has invested in technically sound interventions that are disconnected from local realities. The next decade must see a deliberate shift toward community-centred investments that deliver measurable outcomes at local level. Food systems transformation will only succeed if it is visible in households, farms, schools, and markets and not just in national reports.

Ultimately, the success of the next CAADP decade will not be judged by the number of strategy papers produced. It will be judged by whether governments allocate resources, whether parliaments pass enabling laws, and whether local governments deliver tangible results on the ground. The transition from the Malabo Declaration to the Kampala Declaration must not be an administrative exercise.

It is a political test of whether leadership is willing to direct budgets toward high-impact areas and translate continental visions into lived realities.