

# Gates Agronomy Grant Learnings: Brief



## Overview

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) invested \$123.4 million between 2008 and 2019 in these five grant projects under its Soil Health and Agronomy portfolio, which supports the scaling of solutions to increase productivity-led growth in the smallholder sector and spur rural sector economic development. The strategic focus of the grant projects has evolved to build on work achieved through previous grant projects.



## Grant Projects

- **Cereal Systems Initiative for South Asia (CSISA)**
  - Phase 2 (2012-2016)
  - Phase 3 (2015-2020)
- **N2Africa**
  - Phase 1 (2009-2014)
  - Phase 2 (2013-2019)
- **Taking Maize Agronomy to Scale in Africa (TAMASA)** (2014-2019)
- **African Cassava Agronomy Initiative (ACAI)** (2015-2020)
- **Sustainable Banana Productivity in East Africa (SBPEA)** (2016-2020)

## Recommendations from Evaluation Findings

The foundation had not previously completed a comprehensive assessment of its agronomy portfolio, and therefore contracted with Abt Associates to do so. This strategic assessment included five agronomy grant projects, which are a subset of the foundation's agronomy portfolio. These agronomy grant projects span over a decade, cover diverse geographies in both sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and work across different cropping systems. The purpose of this brief is to summarize final findings from the *Gates Agronomy Grant Learnings: Final Report*.<sup>1</sup>

### Recommendations for Better Understanding and Meeting Existing Research Demand and Target Users' Needs

- Use demand-driven approaches to agronomy research.
- Conduct comprehensive needs assessments as a driver for demand-driven agronomy research.
- Integrate feedback loops from research and development (R&D) to facilitate the delivery of demand-driven and high-value products to target users and to provide opportunities to test and adjust agronomy solutions.
- Commit to gender equality in the prioritization of agronomy research.

### Conduct Comprehensive Needs Assessments as a Driver for Demand-Driven Agronomy Research – Transparent Systematic Prioritization Process

As the ultimate beneficiaries of agronomy research, farmers should be directly consulted about key constraints, hurdles to profitability, and proposed agronomy solutions. This will also build farmers' trust in the tools and technologies developed by the grantee.



### ACAI: Feedback Loops

*"Because whatever we try to do, we check with these partners, to be sure that we are not spending funds and coming back and saying this is not good, partners have rejected. [...] What I see is that when you are able to go through this feedback loop, when it gets to the time for use, they run with it. Because they understand how that thing was developed; they have gone through the process with you."*

<sup>1</sup> Boyle, M., Johns, B., Meijerink, M., & Jones, R. (2020). *Gates Agronomy Grant Learnings: Final Report*. Report prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Abt Associates. Available at: <https://gatesopenresearch.org/>.



**Gender perspectives need to be integrated into ex ante assessments** to identify how agronomy research and solutions could contribute to reduced gender gaps. Using a theory of change may be considered to critically assess how a grantee's proposed activities could impact women differently than men and how it could contribute to better outcomes for women.



#### Recommendations on How to Better Innovate Ways To Scale Agronomy Solutions and Increase Return on Research Investments

- Build linkages with a broader ecosystem of service providers - such as credit and input suppliers- to support use of the grant's recommendations.
- Identify and engage with regulatory dimensions and assess enabling environments to conduct agronomy. Early identification of potential regulatory hurdles to the development and scaling of agronomy solutions is critical.
- Assess enabling environments to scale agronomy solutions.

#### Recommendations on Using Common Approaches Across Grantees Could Lead to Efficiencies

- Streamline approaches to data collection and management. As grant projects collect data on a large scale across geographies and in complex environments, future investments should build on proven approaches to data collection, management, and storage.
- Create a platform to facilitate cross-learning. A common platform could facilitate cross-learning such as best practices to implement needs assessments, insights into effective approaches to scale agronomy solutions, and lessons learned from institutionalizing agronomy research.

#### **N2Africa: National Policy**

*"N2Africa was involved in developing a national inoculants policy in Ethiopia and helped develop a biofertilizer policy. Developed policy recommendations for Tanzania and Ethiopia, including a 10-point policy recommendation for the legume value chain."*

#### **TAMASA: Agronomic Panel Survey (APS) Research in Ethiopia**

*"One of TAMASA's main sources of data, the APS, was a yearly household survey that measured "agronomic, yield and soil components... at the time of harvest."*

#### **CSISA: Impact on Agronomy Sector in India**

*"Previously it was research first and extension follows, but now through the CSISA project it is that extension and research are happening at the same time."*

## Recommendations for Increasing Sustainability, Efficiency, Scalability and Mainstreaming of the Outputs from Grant Projects

- Allow sufficient time to scale and institutionalize agronomy solutions.
- Identify pathways to institutionalize and sustain agronomy solutions at the project design stage.
- Leverage business models and the private sector to reach scale and sustainability.

## Recommendations to Improve Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) to Assess Progress Toward Targets and Outcomes

- Create common indicators across projects.
- Put greater focus on “difficult to measure” impact indicators.
- Set meaningful targets and outcomes.
- Develop an improved reporting platform for M&E data.
- Shift the approach to M&E to include demand-centric information that focuses on target users and target audiences.

### SBPEA: Scaling Partnerships

*“SBPEA partnered with 70 scaling agents across Uganda and Tanzania, and implemented a scaling strategy developed in collaboration with these partners “government, NGOs, farmers’ groups or associations, FM radios centers, and private sector.”*

*“Developing an effective and appropriate business model is challenging, but doing so during the project design stage increases the potential to achieve sustainability.”*

## Data Sources and Methods

We used four main data sources to collect data and answer the research questions.

**Desk Review:** to assess program-level documents, supplemented with key grantee evaluation reports and literature.

**Review of M&E Data:** to analyze grantee results frameworks, results trackers, and indicator performance to assess the grantees’ achievements against their targets.

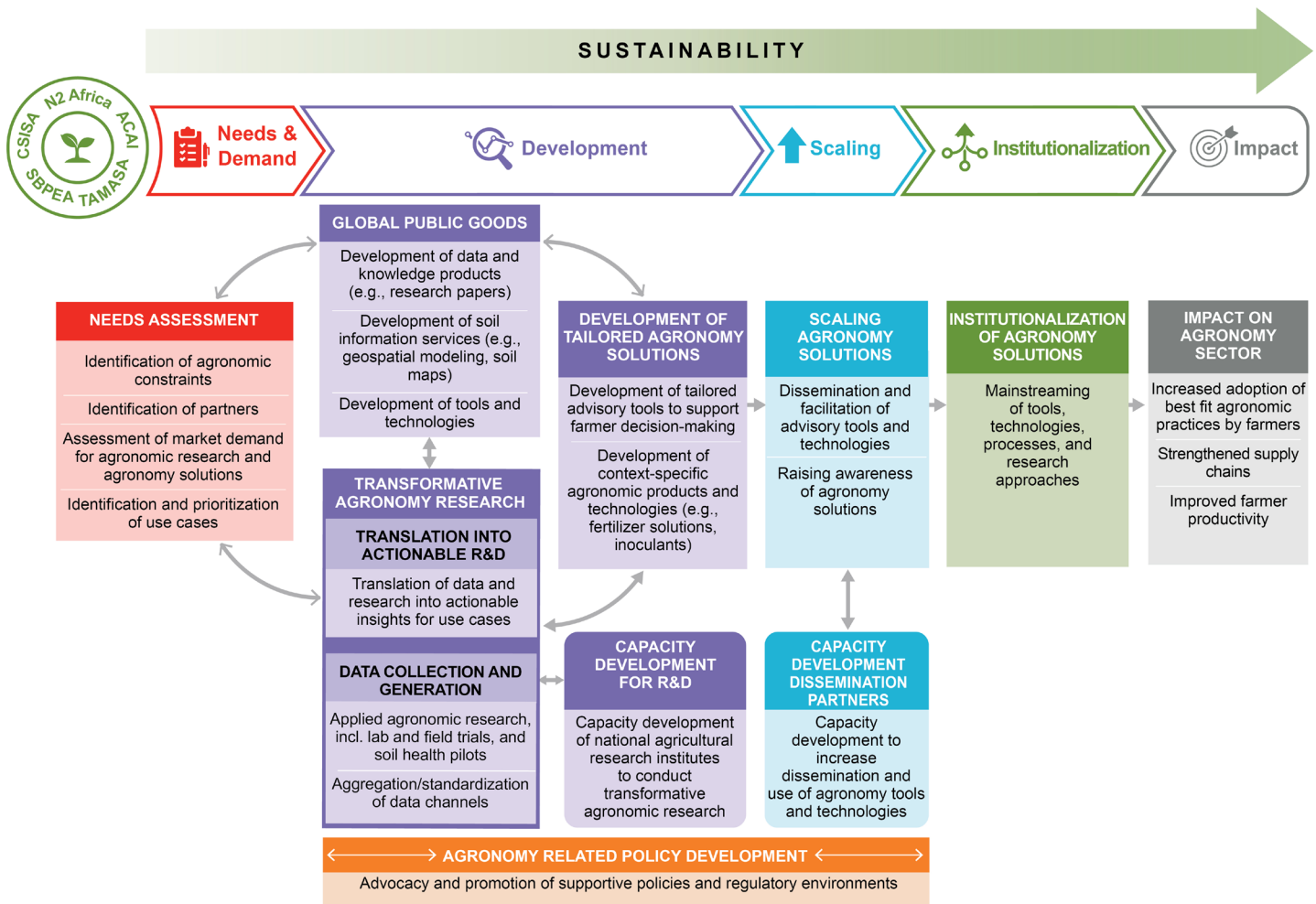
**Online Survey:** to capture stakeholder experiences with each grant and provide more-standardized cross-grant perspectives.

**Key Informant Interviews:** to elicit information on successes, challenges and lessons learned from foundation staff, agronomy experts, key grantee staff and partners for each grant project.



# Evaluation Framework

Abt developed a framework to represent the common steps grantees took to conduct project activities and to work toward target outcomes. We used the framework to classify and compare the activities, challenges, and lessons across the grant projects.



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**Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation:** <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/Global-Growth-and-Opportunity/Agricultural-Development>

BMGF contracted Abt Associates to conduct an independent comprehensive assessment of its agronomy portfolio. Full report results: <https://gatesopenresearch.org/>



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