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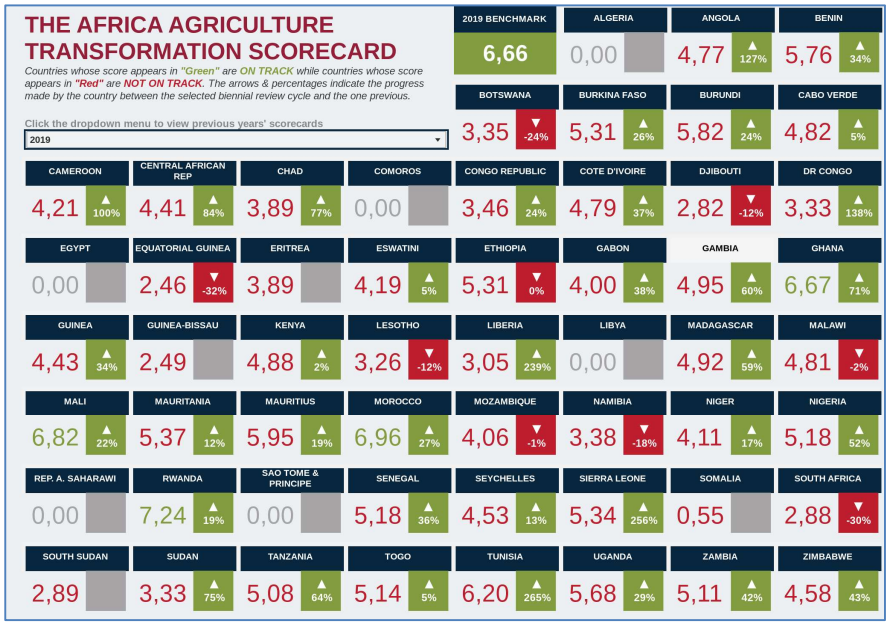
The African Union's Biennial Review: How Data Is Shaping Agricultural Policy



The African Union's score-carding exercise, called the Biennial Review, is a defining example of a locally led process to increase ownership of data, inclusivity of data structures, and learning about agricultural progress among key stakeholders (photo: au.int/en/caadp/toolkit).

As it embarks on a review of progress toward implementing the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), an African-led agricultural transformation agenda, the African Union (AU) is driving a continent-wide effort to strengthen local data systems in its 55 member states. This score-carding exercise, called the Biennial Review, is a defining example of a locally led process to increase ownership of data, inclusivity of data structures, and learning about agricultural progress among key stakeholders.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Coordinated by the AU, the process also serves as an accountability mechanism for member states in a way that aligns with local incentive structures for policy change. The AU's biennial effort—its third in six years—draws on data self-reported by individual countries and then scored at the continental level to track their progress against the Malabo Declaration, the 2014 agreement that established continent-wide goals for "accelerated agricultural growth."

According to the AU's Godfrey Bahiigwa: "Most importantly, the scorecard is a transparency mechanism to drive transformation. It encourages heads of states and governments to assess original commitments made versus performance. Available to all stakeholders in agriculture—government ministries, private sector companies, civil society, farmer organizations, development partners and citizens—we hope the report will stimulate dialogue, collaborative problem solving and a more inclusive African-led process to increase investment in agriculture."

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Policy LINK recently completed a study to gauge how data is being used by African governments to inform decision-making in the agricultural sector. The study, which shared success stories and key lessons, also offered recommendations for strengthening data systems and processes. Among the recommendations was to improve data quality and deepen advocacy, communications, and political engagement around a Biennial Review of the data.

ABOUT CAADP

The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) is the agricultural program of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Established by the African Union assembly in 2003, CAADP focuses on improving food security, nutrition, and increasing incomes in Africa's largely farming-based economies. It aims to achieve this by raising agricultural productivity and increasing public investment in agriculture.

ABOUT POLICY LINK

Policy LINK is a global Feed the Future program to advance leadership and collaboration for better policy systems. Feed the Future is America's global hunger and food security initiative, led by USAID. Learn more at: policylinkglobal.org.

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Why it Matters

As it enters its third Biennial Review of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), the African Union seeks to build on the strong response of member states during the last two reviews, which took place in 2017 and 2019. Here's a snapshot of their scope and key results.

In 2019, 49 African Union member states reported progress on implementing the Malabo Declaration, the 2014 agreement that established continent-wide goals for "accelerated agricultural growth."

The 2017 review motivated the Ministry of Agriculture in Togo to introduce several new projects aimed at improving nutrition and promoting organic farming across the country.

Also in 2017, the review resulted in the launch of new projects in Cote d'Ivoire aimed at promoting farmers' access to credit services and the creation of a rural land agency to facilitate access to land by smallholder farmers.

The Rwandan Government used the Biennial Review process to develop its data system by building and integrating capacity for collecting agriculture data related to the review.

In Kenya, after several data gaps were highlighted in the 2017 Biennial Review, the government commissioned a post-harvest loss study to make key pieces of data available for the review.

THE CAADP TOOLKIT

Six years into the effort, the AU aims to bolster its current Biennial Review with an interactive toolkit that can help visualize the data for a broader audience of policymakers and agricultural stakeholders. Developed with assistance from USAID's Policy LINK program, the purpose of the toolkit is to help users engage more meaningfully with the Biennial Review data through visualizing and interacting directly with it.

That transparency and accessibility, says Policy LINK Regional Director Robert Ouma, will be key to identifying agricultural development trends, especially as the Biennial Review can now draw on more than five years of data. Speaking at a March 3, 2021 online gathering of USAID staff and implementing partners, Ouma encouraged donors to support country-level data systems, which include technical capacity for data collection, validation processes and communications support to dissemination of data, as well as the government institutions that support them.

Now in its third iteration, the Biennial Review draws on more than five years of data, making it easier to identify trends in Africa's agricultural development.

With funding from Feed the Future, USAID's global hunger and food security initiative, Policy LINK provides "backbone" support to CAADP. Among the AU program's seven commitments is for member states to "critically review" their 'actions and results' from implementing ambitious agricultural development goals contained in the Malabo Declaration every two years. The current Biennial Review is set to enter the country-level data collection stage beginning late March 2021. Thereafter, countries will carry out a multi-stakeholder participatory data validation process before then data is further validated at the regional level. Policy LINK, in collaboration with other partners, will continue to provide design, technical and facilitation support to this AU-led process.

7 LESSONS FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Policy LINK recently completed a study to gauge how Biennial Review data is being used by governments to inform decision-making. The study revealed seven lessons:

1. The data is widely sourced—and widely used. Government officials and other actors in the following countries reported using Biennial Review data for prioritization and planning purposes: Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, and Uganda.

2. It's shaping national conversations around agricultural policy. Countries report that the Biennial Review and its associate data have sparked conversations that have led to changes in government policies.

3. It's facilitating new conversations. Through learning forums like the annual MAPLE event, CAADP PP, ministerial meetings and others, countries report that the BR is used to facilitate informed exchanges related to agricultural performance.

4. It's encouraging countries to boost their data systems. Countries report that they have improved their internal data collection processes to ensure higher data quality, ensuring that their progress is accurately reflected in the report.

5. It's providing a way to hold governments accountable. Several countries reported that the Biennial Review process incentivized governments to make public commitments, to which non-state actors (NSAs) can hold them accountable.

6. It's driving resource allocation and investment. Countries report that the Biennial Review report has been used by actors to determine budget allocations and investment strategies.

7. It's spurring cross-sector collaboration. Countries report using the Biennial Review report and data to spur cross-sector collaboration and new partnerships, namely between the public and private sectors.