**MSU at the African Food Systems Forum: Leading from the Front and the Back**

**FSG Issue Brief**

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Michigan State University (MSU) showcased its leadership in applied research, policy engagement, and equitable partnering with local organizations around issues of global food systems transformation at the 2024 Africa Food Systems Forum (AFS Forum) in Kigali, Rwanda. Through keynote addresses, foundational research, and strategic partnerships, MSU demonstrated its capacity to lead both visibly and behind the scenes.

**Leading from the Front**

**Thomas Reardon’s Plenary Keynote and AASR Leadership**

Thomas Reardon, *University Distinguished Professor*, delivered a powerful keynote at the AFS Forum, emphasizing the central role of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in transforming African food systems. His work on the African Agricultural Status Report (AASR) 2024, co-authored with Saweda Liverpool-Tasie, *MSU University Foundation* *Professor*, presented compelling data showing that MSMEs drive over 85% of food markets in Africa and highlighting the central and growing role that food markets, for both sale and purchase, play in assuring livelihoods and food security for both rural and urban residents in developing countries. Reardon called for increased investment in infrastructure—such as roads, improved wholesale markets, energy and water, and information communication technologies (ICT)—to unlock MSMEs’ potential, better serve consumers’ and farmers’ needs, and ensure sustainable growth.

Reardon’s speech resonated widely, not only at the AFS Forum but also at subsequent high-level meetings; the talk generated great “buzz” during the forum; was commented on by the prime minister of Rwanda in his closing remarks for the forum; was broadcast in full in French on France International and other world radio, generating much feedback to Dr. Reardon; was central to the framing message delivered by Dr. Patrick Webb, Chief Nutritionist at USAID, in his opening remarks for the meeting of the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development (BIFAD) in Washington, DC; and was extensively commented on by high level USAID leadership during the annual meeting of the Innovation Lab (IL) Directors meeting in Washington, D.C., with reference to its importance for the forthcoming review of the agency’s Global Food Security Strategy.

Dr. Reardon’s leadership of the 2024 AASR caps a 10-year period in which several MSU faculty, working with local partners, led five of these landmark annual reports, heavily influencing the policy and investment debate in Africa.

**David Tschirley’s Side Event Keynote**

Meanwhile, David Tschirley, *Professor and Co-Director of MSU’s Food Security Group (FSG)*, delivered the keynote at a side event sponsored by the USAID-financed Feed the Future Innovation Labs Council during the AFS Forum on September 3rd. Dr. Tschirley’s remarks emphasized the foundational role **of** **deep localization** to **scaling**, that true scaling is a highly localized adaptation of approaches to fit local context, that effective policy can be a “scaling machine” by influencing millions of daily decisions of households and firms, and that the task for applied researchers is to embed their work in a deeply localized process and “let go” so that workable solutions with broad buy-in from local actors can emerge. As Chair of the IL Council over the next year, Dr. Tschirley will work with other IL colleagues to explore these ideas and their implications for the way that Innovation Labs go about their work.

**Leading from the Back**

MSU’s leadership went beyond the spotlight, with its Food Security Group (FSG) faculty engaged in critical behind-the-scenes work to promote African-led solutions. During the forum, MSU faculty held numerous strategic meetings with local partners, USAID Washington, USAID missions, and other development partners with a focus on advancing the leadership of the African Network of Agricultural Policy Institutes (ANAPRI) and its centers in the follow-up and country level and regional level to the African Fertilizer and Soil Health Summit.

These behind-the-scenes efforts build on more than a year of research and capacity-building initiatives led by MSU and ANAPRI, with the dual purpose of generating reliable empirical information and ensuring that African countries can drive their own agricultural development through localized and sustainable approaches.

**MSU’s Unique Strength**

MSU’s role both in the spotlight and behind-the-scenes at the AFS Forum perfectly captures the unique strength that it brings to its work in development research and policy engagement - thought leadership and a unique ability to make messages understandable and compelling to many people, joined to an unrivalled network and willingness to work in the trenches to move things along the right way – in equitable partnership with the local organizations it has worked with for so long. MSU and its Food Security Group intend over the long-term to continue working this way as they promote local, sustainable agricultural solutions that address the continent’s most pressing challenges.