

A JR Biotek Foundation Report

JR Biotek Foundation-AGRIIP Nigeria Initiative Launch & Strategic Roundtable

Rebuilding Indigenous Crop Systems for Climate Resilience, Food Security & Livelihoods

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About this Report

This report captures key discussions, insights and strategic directions emerging from the **JR Biotek Foundation-AGRIIP Nigeria Initiative Launch & Strategic Roundtable**, held in Abuja on 31 March 2026. It also reflects JR Biotek Foundation's evolving experience and strategic thinking through **AGRIIP – the Agri-Innovation & Impact Platform**. It is intended as an institutional record and forward-looking programme report rather than an academic research publication. Perspectives attributed to the roundtable reflect discussions during the convening, while AGRIIP's strategic direction and programme approach are those of JR Biotek Foundation.

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From Dialogue to Implementation



Bringing the ecosystem together: participants at the JR Biotek Foundation–AGRIIP Nigeria Initiative Launch & Strategic Roundtable in Abuja, 31 March 2026. Photo: JR Biotek Foundation.

Nigeria has extraordinary agricultural assets: farmers with generations of knowledge, world-class scientists, diverse agroecological systems, entrepreneurial talent, research institutions, and indigenous crops with significant nutritional, environmental and economic potential. Yet these assets do not always operate as a connected system.

On 31 March 2026, JR Biotek Foundation convened the **AGRIIP Nigeria Initiative Launch & Strategic Roundtable** in Abuja to explore what it would take to change that. The convening brought together perspectives from research and academia, agricultural finance, private enterprise, innovation, farming and community systems, development practice and the creative sector. Rather than treating food security as a problem of agricultural production alone, participants considered the wider system connecting farmers, research, policy, finance, enterprise, markets and culture.

The central message emerging from the discussions was clear: **Nigeria has considerable knowledge, policy, institutional capacity and innovation. The greater challenge is connecting these assets through coordinated, accountable and locally grounded implementation.**

This report captures the major insights emerging from Abuja and the implications for the next phase of **AGRIIP – the Agri-Innovation & Impact Platform** in Nigeria. More importantly, it looks forward.

The question after Abuja is no longer simply **what should change?** It is: **What can we build together, and how will we know that it is working?**

1. Executive summary

The AGRIP Nigeria Initiative Launch & Strategic Roundtable marked an important transition in JR Biotek Foundation's work in Nigeria: from more than a decade of investing in scientific capacity towards building stronger systems connecting **scientific knowledge with farmers, indigenous crops, entrepreneurship and implementation**.

The roundtable focused particularly on the future of Nigeria's indigenous and locally important crops and their potential contribution to **climate resilience, food and nutrition security, livelihoods and economic development**.

Participants identified interconnected barriers affecting agricultural transformation, including:

- gaps between policy and implementation;
- fragmented research, farmer, finance and market systems;
- weak seed, production and value-chain infrastructure around indigenous crops;
- limited pathways from research to application and enterprise;
- farmer distrust created by interventions that do not deliver sustained results;
- inadequate access to appropriate agricultural finance;
- limited youth participation and perceptions of agriculture as an unattractive livelihood;
- infrastructure, security and other structural constraints; and
- insufficient coordination among actors already working within the agricultural system.

A particularly important conclusion was that these challenges cannot be addressed independently. Improving seed without strengthening markets may leave farmers with crops they cannot sell. Increasing production without investing in storage and processing can create losses rather than livelihoods. Developing technologies without understanding farmer priorities can result in low adoption. More so, funding research without pathways to translation can leave promising discoveries within institutions, and promoting indigenous crops without understanding consumer perceptions, cultural value and market demand may fail to create sustainable demand.

The Abuja discussions therefore strengthened AGRIP's systems approach. **The crop is not the intervention. The crop is the entry point into a system.**

AGRIP will use that entry point to connect farmer knowledge, scientific research, seed systems, production, processing, entrepreneurship, finance, markets, policy and culture.

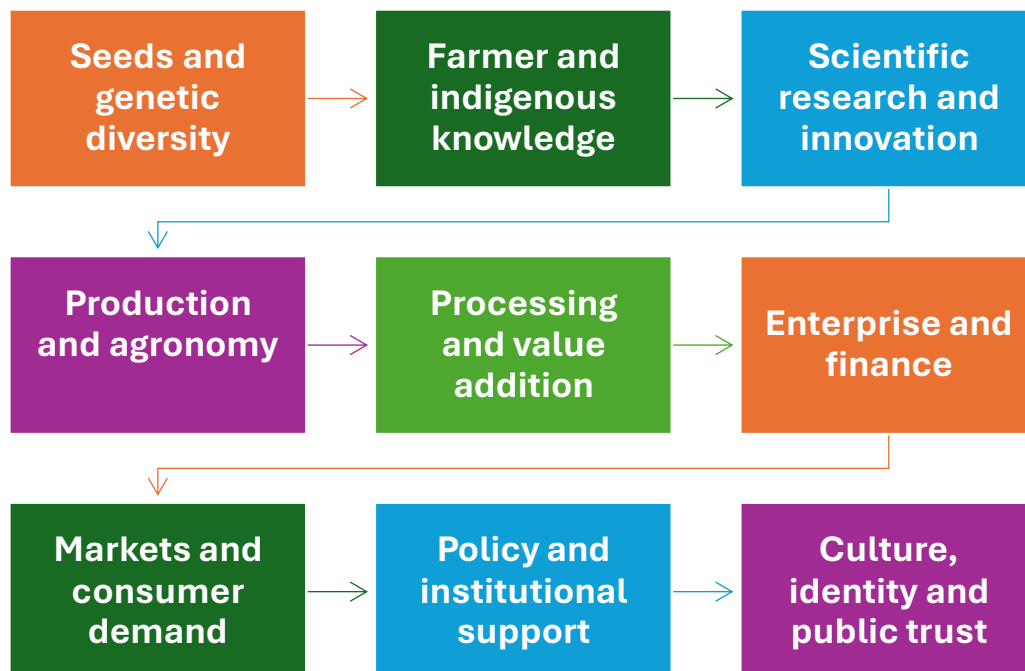
2. Why Indigenous crop systems, and why now?

Nigeria's food future will be shaped by difficult and interconnected pressures: climate variability, population growth, declining agricultural productivity in some contexts, food and nutrition insecurity, rural livelihoods, changing consumer preferences and vulnerabilities within food supply chains.

At the same time, Nigeria possesses enormous biological and agricultural diversity.

Indigenous and locally important crops, including crops such as Bambara groundnut, millet, sorghum and cocoyam, are embedded within local diets, farming systems, culture and knowledge. Some possess characteristics that could become increasingly important under changing climatic conditions. Yet many remain comparatively under-researched, under-invested and poorly connected to modern breeding, processing, financing and market systems.

The original AGRIIP Nigeria strategy recognised that rebuilding these crops requires much more than asking farmers to plant them. It requires rebuilding the infrastructure surrounding them:



This was the systems challenge brought to Abuja.

3. From scientific capacity to systems change

AGRIIP builds on JR Biotek Foundation's experience of investing in African scientific capacity. Over the Foundation's first decade, scientists across Africa participated in practical scientific training, mentorship, professional development, research networking and innovation programmes. That experience demonstrated the power of investing in people. But it also exposed a wider challenge.

A highly trained scientist cannot transform a food system alone. Research needs connection to farmer priorities. Farmers need access to knowledge, technologies, finance and markets, and entrepreneurs need scientific evidence and viable demand. In addition, research institutions need pathways through which discoveries can move towards application, and innovations certainly need enabling policy, finance and institutions if they are to survive beyond a pilot.

AGRIIP represents an evolution of this work. It asks: **What happens when the scientific capacity we have spent years helping to build is connected directly with farmers, entrepreneurs and institutions around challenges identified on the ground?**

Nigeria is one of the first countries in which JR Biotek Foundation is building and testing that model.

4. Abuja: Bringing different parts of the system together

The Abuja Roundtable was deliberately designed as a multidisciplinary conversation. Rather than convening only scientists or agricultural practitioners, the dialogue brought together perspectives spanning the wider agricultural ecosystem.

- **Dr Flora Asibe**, representing the JR Biotek Foundation-AGRIIP Nigeria team, helped open and frame the convening around collaboration and practical action.
- **Dr Kabir Mustapha Umar** of the Centre for Dryland Agriculture, Bayero University Kano, and a Senior Advisor at JR Biotek Foundation, contributed perspectives on Nigeria's agricultural context and the importance of strengthening the connections between research, farmers and implementation.
- **Dr Carol Ibe**, Founder and Executive Director of JR Biotek Foundation, presented the evolution of JR Biotek's work and the rationale for AGRIIP, including its focus on connecting farmers, African scientists, indigenous crops, research and entrepreneurship.
- **Mainda Kiwelu**, representing the JR Biotek Foundation-AGRIIP Fellowship, contributed to discussions around innovation and entrepreneurship and the need to

create stronger pathways through which scientific knowledge and locally identified challenges can generate practical solutions.

The convening subsequently moved into panel and working-group discussions around finance, policy, research, innovation, farmer systems and implementation. The objective was not to produce another catalogue of Nigeria's agricultural challenges. It was to begin identifying where the system is breaking down, and where coordinated intervention could make a meaningful difference.

5. What we heard: Eight systemic challenges

5.1. Policy is only as strong as implementation

Participants highlighted the persistent distance between policy ambition and implementation on the ground. Agricultural strategies can be undermined by fragmented responsibilities, inadequate financing, weak accountability and limited continuity. The implication for AGRIIP is important.

The Platform should not measure progress by policy engagement alone. Where policy is relevant, the emphasis should be on how policy enables implementation, removes barriers and strengthens systems that farmers, scientists and enterprises can actually use.

5.2. Indigenous crops need systems, not campaigns

Participants recognised the potential of indigenous crops while highlighting weaknesses across seed systems, awareness, production, research, processing and commercial availability. Promoting a crop without rebuilding the system around it is unlikely to generate lasting change.

For AGRIIP, crop prioritisation therefore needs to consider not only biological potential but also: farmer interest, local knowledge, agroecological suitability, nutrition, production constraints, processing opportunities, consumer demand and market potential.

5.3. Farmer trust must be earned

A recurring concern was farmer scepticism towards interventions that arrive with promises but disappear before meaningful results are visible. This led to an important principle:

Demonstration builds evidence. Consistency builds trust.

AGRIIP's field model should therefore prioritise sustained relationships, demonstration, farmer participation and transparent learning rather than expecting adoption simply because a technology has scientific merit.

5.4. The research-to-impact pathway remains weak

Nigeria has considerable scientific expertise, yet promising research does not automatically become a technology, product, service or improved farming practice. Researchers may lack entrepreneurial support. Entrepreneurs may lack scientific evidence. Both may be disconnected from farmers. The roundtable reinforced the need for mechanisms that deliberately connect these groups.

5.5. Value chains cannot begin and end at production

Farmers need more than improved yields. They need somewhere to sell.

Participants identified weaknesses in storage, processing, packaging, logistics and market access. For indigenous crops, this challenge is particularly significant. Increasing production without creating demand and value addition could simply transfer greater risk to farmers. Production and market development must therefore advance together.

5.6. Agricultural finance must fit agricultural realities

Access to finance remains a constraint across farmer and enterprise systems.

Participants discussed the limitations of excessive dependence on donor funding and the need for more diversified approaches involving public, private, development and catalytic capital. The long-term opportunity is not simply to attract more funding into agriculture, but to create agricultural systems sufficiently functional that appropriate forms of investment can succeed within them.

5.7. Young people need credible pathways into agriculture

Agriculture must compete for the ambitions and talents of a new generation. That requires moving beyond an image of agriculture as subsistence farming alone. Modern food systems require plant scientists, breeders, biotechnologists, food scientists, engineers, data specialists, processors, logistics experts, communicators, investors and entrepreneurs. The opportunity is therefore not simply to persuade young people to farm. It is to demonstrate that agriculture is an ecosystem in which they can research, invent, build businesses and create careers.

5.8. Structural constraints cannot be ignored

Insecurity, infrastructure, access to land, finance and weak farmer organisation affect what is possible on the ground. A scientifically excellent intervention that ignores these realities may still fail. Context is therefore not an inconvenience to implementation. **Context is part of the intervention.**

6. Listening first: Farmers as partners in innovation

One of the most important implications of the Abuja dialogue is that rebuilding agricultural systems cannot happen from conference rooms alone. **AGRIIP therefore begins with farmers.**

Earlier in March 2026, JR Biotek Foundation and Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUUAU), Nigeria, brought scientists together with 50 farmers from five communities in Abia State. Farmers discussed the changes they were observing in their fields, including rainfall patterns, soils, crop varieties, pests and diseases, farming seasons and the ways they were already adapting. The purpose was not merely to collect data. It was to begin changing where research questions come from.

A farmer reporting that a crop is no longer performing as expected could be identifying a future plant-breeding question. A farmer describing a new disease could be identifying a plant-pathology challenge, and likewise, a community abandoning a crop could be pointing towards a production, processing, cultural or market problem.

AGRIIP's role is to help turn these observations into questions that scientists and entrepreneurs can investigate with farmers rather than simply for them. This approach would subsequently be expanded through larger farmer engagement in Kano State.

7. From farmer challenges to science-backed innovation

The Abuja discussions reinforced the importance of connecting agricultural innovation more closely with the realities experienced by farmers and communities.

Through AGRIIP, JR Biotek Foundation is developing a farmer-informed approach that brings together **African scientific expertise, entrepreneurship, institutional partnerships and local knowledge** around challenges identified on the ground.

The aim is to create stronger pathways through which locally relevant questions can inform research and innovation, and promising ideas can move closer to practical application and impact.

Learning from this work in Nigeria will contribute to the continued development of AGRIIP and its future application in other African contexts.

8. Indigenous crops as platforms for innovation

One of AGRIIP's most important propositions is that indigenous crops should not be understood only as crops that need “saving”. They can also be platforms for scientific discovery, entrepreneurship and economic development.

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Consider a single crop. Its genetics may open new research opportunities, its response to drought may offer insights into climate resilience, and its nutritional profile may generate new avenues for food and health research. Challenges in its production may drive agronomic innovation, while difficulties in processing may inspire new technologies and engineering solutions. Its flour, oil, protein or other components could become the basis for new food products and enterprises, while its cultural history and significance can strengthen consumer identity, appreciation and demand. Together, these possibilities can build an entire value chain, creating opportunities for scientific discovery, innovation, enterprise and livelihoods around a crop that may previously have been undervalued.

This changes the question from: **“How do we get farmers to grow more indigenous crops?”** to **“What scientific, agricultural, cultural and economic system would make this crop valuable enough for farmers, consumers and businesses to choose it?”**

That is a much more ambitious question. It is also closer to the systems change AGRIP seeks to enable.

9. The JR Biotek Foundation-AGRIP Research & Entrepreneurship Fellowship

The **AGRIP Research & Entrepreneurship Fellowship** will be an important part of JR Biotek Foundation’s efforts to connect African scientific expertise and entrepreneurship with real agricultural and food-system challenges.

Bringing researchers and entrepreneurs into closer dialogue with farmers, institutions and one another will create opportunities for **African-led research, innovation and enterprise** around locally relevant priorities.

Success will ultimately be measured not simply by participation in the Fellowship, but by the quality and relevance of the ideas, collaborations and solutions that emerge from it.

10. Building trust through demonstration

One of the clearest lessons from Abuja was the importance of visible delivery. This has significant implications for how AGRIP should scale. Rather than beginning with large geographical expansion, the Platform can first develop **well-supported demonstration environments** where farmers, scientists and entrepreneurs can work together over time.

These may include: crop demonstration plots; farmer-led trials; research field sites; seed multiplication and evaluation; processing prototypes; market testing; and community learning activities. These sites can become places where farmers see evidence rather than hear promises. They can also become living laboratories for scientists and entrepreneurs. The principle is straightforward: **Demonstrate locally. Learn rigorously. Scale responsibly.**

11. From crops to markets

Rebuilding indigenous crop systems will ultimately require demand. AGRIP therefore needs to work across both sides of the agricultural system: **what farmers can sustainably produce** and **what consumers and markets will value and buy**. This creates opportunities for innovation in areas such as: flours and composite flours; nutritious foods and snacks; ingredients; processing technologies; improved packaging and storage; seed enterprises; local procurement; institutional markets; and new consumer products rooted in indigenous crops.

This is where entrepreneurship becomes central rather than peripheral. A resilient indigenous crop system must eventually generate value for the people participating in it, particularly farmers.

12. Culture is part of the system

The Abuja convening deliberately included **art and creative expression** alongside science, policy and finance. The Art-for-Impact component reflected a core AGRIP belief: **agriculture is not only biological and economic**. It is cultural. Food carries memory. Crops carry identity. Farming practices carry knowledge across generations, and consumer choices are shaped partly by what societies learn to value, or devalue.

Rebuilding indigenous crop systems therefore also means rebuilding **visibility, pride, knowledge and demand**. This is why AGRIP's approach includes storytelling and cultural engagement alongside research and enterprise. Scientific evidence can tell us what a crop can do. Culture can help determine whether people continue to value it.

13. From Abuja to future action

The Abuja Roundtable helped sharpen priorities that will guide the next phase of AGRIP Nigeria and its longer-term expansion across Africa. The discussions reinforced the importance of farmer-informed research, investment in indigenous crops, stronger links between science and application, entrepreneurship, market development, and collaboration across the agricultural ecosystem.

Building on these insights, JR Biotek Foundation will continue working with farmers, scientists, entrepreneurs, institutions and partners to translate locally identified challenges into science-backed innovation and practical impact.

The direction is clear: **move beyond isolated interventions towards stronger, connected systems for agricultural innovation and impact**.

14. What will we measure?

AGRIIP's success cannot be measured only through workshops, meetings and participation numbers. Over time, the questions that matter are different.

- Are farmers influencing the research agenda?
- Are farmer-identified challenges being investigated?
- Are scientists developing new programmes around indigenous crops?
- Are promising varieties and practices being tested under farmer conditions?
- Are farmers returning to crops they had previously reduced or abandoned?
- Are new products and processing solutions emerging?
- Are enterprises becoming viable?
- Are farmers gaining access to better markets and greater value?
- Are young African scientists and entrepreneurs building careers around these food-system challenges?
- Are indigenous crops gaining scientific, economic and cultural value? And ultimately:
- Are farming communities becoming more resilient and prosperous?

These questions move AGRIIP beyond measuring activity towards measuring change.

15. Looking towards 2036

The Abuja Roundtable was a Nigerian convening, but it sits within a much longer horizon. Over the next decade, AGRIIP's wider ambition is to contribute towards:

- **10,000 African scientists** developing as crop-centred researchers, innovators and translators;
- **10 million smallholder farmers** supported through stronger indigenous-crop-based systems;
- at least **30 indigenous crops** safeguarded, researched and valorised;
- **1,000 sustainable agrifood ventures** rooted in indigenous crops; and
- implementation and learning across **10 African countries**.

These are ambitious goals. They cannot be delivered by JR Biotek Foundation alone. Nor should they be. The opportunity is to build an ecosystem in which **farmers, African scientists, universities, research institutes, entrepreneurs, government, investors, development partners, cultural actors and communities each contribute what they do best**. AGRIIP's role is to help connect those capabilities around shared outcomes.

16. The work begins on the ground

The AGRIIP Nigeria Initiative Launch & Strategic Roundtable did not produce a single solution to Nigeria's agricultural challenges. That was not its purpose. It did something more useful. It helped clarify the system that needs to be built. A system in which farmers help determine the questions. Scientists have the capacity and resources to investigate them. Entrepreneurs can translate promising knowledge into practical applications. Institutions provide continuity. Finance enables what works to grow. Markets create value. Policy enables rather than obstructs implementation. And indigenous crops are recognised not as relics of the past, but as potential assets for Africa's future.

The challenge after Abuja is therefore **execution**. It is moving from conversations to field sites. From farmer observations to research questions. From research to innovation. From innovation to enterprises and markets. From individual projects to connected systems, and from promising pilots to evidence of lasting change.

AGRIIP Nigeria is beginning that journey from the ground up because the future of Nigeria's food systems will not be transformed by one organisation, one technology or one crop. **It will be transformed by building the relationships and systems through which farmers, science, enterprise, finance, policy and culture can work together and keep working together long after a single project ends.**

Closing Reflection

The Abuja programme included a creative reflection by Khadija Siddiqah Zubair of Skyline University, Nigeria, whose poetry captured the deeper connection between land, value and Africa's agricultural future:

“Take from the ground what has always been yours... gold is not richer than soil.”

Her words offer a fitting challenge for what comes next.

Nigeria already possesses extraordinary resources in its soil, crops, biodiversity, farmers, scientists, entrepreneurs, institutions and indigenous knowledge. The task ahead is not simply to recognise their value, but to **build the systems that allow that value to grow. This is the future JR Biotek Foundation's AGRIIP Initiative is working to build.**

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Reimagining Africa's Food Future

Through scientific leadership, indigenous crops, innovation and partnership.

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