For decades, a myriad of actors made access to quality inputs to farmers, their primary mission. But insufficient coordination and duplication of efforts have stalled progress. The average use of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides in West Africa remains relatively low compared to the rest of the world.

“This is down to actors working in silos,” says Innocent Okuku, a Nigerian-based fertilizer dealer.

But this era of uncoordinated delivery of inputs to farmers in West Africa may be about to witness a substantial change.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is demanding partners dialogue, understand one another better, align interventions, and leverage the scarce resources to achieve a more significant impact in the livelihood of smallholder farmers.

ECOWAS is a regional integration instrument working to implement the ambitious agenda of African Heads in West Africa. Doubling food production by 2025 is central to the agriculture plan.

“Our ambition is to produce enough food to be able to feed our people by 2025,” says Sekou Sangare, ECOWAS Commissioner of Agriculture.

“We have to build the right partnerships at the national and local levels to strengthen the resilience of our farmers facing the threat of climate change.”

How Did This Become Possible?

Many development actors are working in West Africa. One of the leading investors in agriculture development is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Roughly USD 300 million is provided to multiple partners to advance the food and nutrition security agenda of West Africa from USAID.

Agriculture development is a priority for many of the actors working in the region. However, these partners often do not know where, when, and what everyone is doing.

Rather than press on with field interventions only, USAID determined together with ECOWAS and other regional partners that it might be helpful to start a process of mapping out the actors and to get them to speak together while improving the policy and regulatory space.

This has taken the form of an annual dialogue — the first of such forums held in Dakar, Senegal. Abuja, Nigeria’s capital, hosted the second edition in early February 2020.

“We started off with 30 partners in 2019. We doubled that number in 2020,” according to Abdou Tenkouano, Executive Director of CORAF, the institution coordinating these efforts in West Africa.

“Donor coordination is challenging. But multi-stakeholder platforms can considerably improve our way
of doing business. You’ve seen that it allows enterprises to share the challenges they face in moving inputs from one country to another. This allows ECOWAS to understand better the challenges of businesses and will hopefully take necessary measures to improve the situation so that the potential of the private sector can be unleashed. But it does not end here. Sustainable change requires continuous exchanges,” says Dr. Tenkouano.

Spinning-off Input Delivery to the Private Sector

Experts argue that effective partnerships underpinned with active private sector participation is the only viable approach to deliver the needed innovations to farmers of West Africa.

“Ultimately, businesses have to be the ones driving this process,” says Abdrahamane Dicko, a Program and Policy Advisor at USAID West Africa.

For decades, states in West Africa played a major role in the regulation as well as in the provision of quality inputs to farmers. Many countries still operate subsidy systems that allow farmers to access quality inputs at relatively affordable costs.

As part of USAID West Africa support to the development of agriculture, the ECOWAS and its partners have undertaken some key reforms notably in harmonizing regulations in the seed, fertilizer, and pesticide areas and is about to complete a new strategy tackling inputs in an integrated manner.

While this has advanced access to quality inputs, many argue the private sector needs a more conspicuous role for any lasting and meaningful change to occur.

“Ultimately, our roles will fade and give in to the private sector to perpetuate this process,” maintains Abdrahamane Dicko

“The private sector has more opportunities and resources that can be leveraged to grow the West Africa seed sector. Their potential is far more significant than any support the US government or any other partner can put in play, explains Catherine Hamlin, Lead of the Agriculture Team at USAID West Africa.

Delivering Efficiently and Sustainably

USAID foreign assistance is currently set up to empower local institutions and actors to take ownership, define and implement lasting solutions to their challenges.

“We always look at the issue of sustainability in our programming. That means we want to see more private sector engagement and ownership in developing this sector in West Africa,” added Catherine Hamlin.

Good Signals to the Private Sector

Unlike the first iteration of the regional consultation meeting, the Abuja edition saw the participation of many more input enterprises. Many were self-sponsored, further demonstrating the private sector’s willingness to engage and seek lasting solutions to the challenges of the input sector in West Africa. Overall, ten of the leading private enterprises were in attendance.

They came itching to explore new opportunities, strengthen existing collaboration, but also concerned that the meeting might not be productive.

“When I got an invitation, I was hesitant. I thought I was going to waste my time,” says Stephen Yacouba Atar, CEO of one of Nigeria’s oldest seed company, Da-Allgreen Seeds Limited.

“But, look, I was able to obtain critical business intelligence on hybrid rice seeds. It’s also been a vehicle to channel our grievances to ECOWAS and decision-maker and seek solutions together,” the Da-Allgreen Seeds Limited boss said.

Da-Allgreen Seeds Limited grows and distributes several dry cereal varieties in Nigeria and West Africa. Mr. Atar indicated his plans to diversify into hybrid rice variety had for long been put on hold because he couldn’t get the right information or partner.

“I got that at this meeting. And that is how useful and relevant it is for us as businesses.”

Some experts have touted Bio-fertilizers as the right kind of nutrients to use in West Africa.

In the past six years, Contec Global Agro Limited has been researching and producing exclusively orga-
nic fertilizers, biopesticides.

“We are currently established only in Nigeria. Our ambition is to expand to Senegal and Ghana. That’s what brought us to this forum. It has been beneficial to our business,” says Dipankur Maini, Business Development Manager at Contec Global Agro Limited.

Nigeria accounts for close to 60 percent of the seed market in West Africa. Most of the Nigerian companies accounting for this production are registered under the Seed Entrepreneurs Association of Nigeria (SEEDAN). While SEEDAN sees value in the meeting, they, however, suggested that the annual consultation should be set up to encourage sincere and critical exchanges on the challenges and opportunities of the input sector in West Africa.

“What explains that with the so many actors working to facilitate access to seeds, our use of inputs is still slow? Why is it that Eastern and Southern Africa are performing better than us? We need to do business differently. This forum help, but we need action,” said the SEEDAN Chairman.

It is About Farmers

“At the end of the day, what matters is smallholder farmers do not have to wait a week, travel long distances to access quality inputs,” says Sekou Sangare, the ECOWAS Commissioner of Agriculture.

“I am convinced there will be a day when farmers in the remotest corner of West Africa will be able to purchase seeds and fertilizers wherever they want. It will come a time when inputs are available as Coco-Cola is in our grocery store,” says Innocent Okuku, Vice President of the West Africa Fertilizer Association.