EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BRIDGING THE GAP: Policy Innovations to Put Women at the Center of Food Systems Transformation in Africa
The Panel has addressed women in agriculture before, specifically in the report titled *Women in African Agriculture: farmers, mothers, innovators, and educators* in 2012, and in all its reports as a cross-cutting policy issue. With a sense of urgency, the Malabo Montpellier Panel now revisits the status of women in Africa’s agrifood systems to propose further actions to put women at the center of food system change and reflect on policy opportunities for the way forward.

Women are pivotal to transforming Africa’s agrifood systems and to attaining the continent’s job, growth, and health agendas. Almost two thirds of women in Africa, are employed in agrifood systems as food producers, agrodealers, processors, distributors, and traders (FAO 2023). They are also often responsible for sourcing and cooking food for the health and wellbeing of their families.

Yet, women’s capacity to contribute to efficient, resilient, and sustainable food systems and their transformation is severely curbed by a variety of social and systemic challenges that diminish their opportunities to exercise agency within the household and beyond. Women are often prevented from being active leaders and shapers of their food environment, the consequences of which can be far-reaching. A lack of access to land, inputs, technology and information, finance, and employment opportunities severely undermines women’s role in food systems, their empowerment, and their economic growth and wellbeing. It also makes them less able to adapt to a changing climate.

Gender inequality is both a cause and a consequence of food insecurity. Recognizing the moral imperative and economic opportunity of tackling gender inequality in Africa’s agrifood systems, several African countries have invested in targeted interventions to level the playing field between men and women, and to bring women to the center of food systems. Many African countries have taken large leaps forward in girls’ education, and women’s political representation. Digital technologies and mechanization have also progressed, while the provision of extension services and access to finance, information, and new markets are all increasingly inclusive of women in the food system. However, this progress remains fragile, particularly in view of climate change and, it is not going far enough.

This report by the Malabo Montpellier Panel – *Bridging the gap: Policy innovations to put women at the center of food systems transformation in Africa* – reviews the current situation in Africa and draws on the experience of four systematically selected African countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, and Togo. It focuses on their policy and institutional innovations, which are driving systems-level change and transformation. This report provides a regional focus on the status of women in Africa’s food systems, with emphasis on public efforts contributing to women’s agency and empowerment. While we conclude that Africa has made some progress in improving women’s empowerment in food systems, efforts to address gender equality must be urgently redoubled to ensure that the continent delivers on its commitments to its citizens. As Africa’s policymakers consider a post-Malabo Declaration era, women themselves and their empowerment must take center stage to ensure that future food systems work for them.

The Action Agenda presented by the Malabo Montpellier Panel draws on the Africa-wide experiences and the four countries to highlight some key factors underlying their success.

- **Consolidate African policy frameworks:** There is a strong track record of commitments by the African Union and regional bodies to enhance women’s position in society and in the food systems. Those commitments, however, need to be consolidated coherently. The African commitments to the UNFSS and the follow-up to the UNFSS as well as the post-Malabo agenda provide a basis and opportunity for that.

- **Implement and resource policies and institutions:** In order to meet global, continental, and national commitments on women’s equality and on food systems transformation, governments must make a dedicated effort to implement their pledges to these issues. This must include the allocation of dedicated funding in governments’ national budget as well as affirmative policy measures to increase resource access and asset holdings of women. Given that both food systems and gender equality cut across sectoral ministries, meaningful coordination across ministries is crucial for effective implementation.
• **Political representation**: To address deeply rooted, systemic inequalities and to ensure that policies are designed in a way that meet the specific needs of women, women must be equally represented at all levels of government and decision-making processes, and in food systems services. An entry point can be local government structures in rural and urban areas that are initially more compatible with women’s other ongoing responsibilities and activities.

• **Center women**: To empower women and strengthen their agency and role as changemakers in food systems, there is an urgent need for deliberate programming of interventions that promote equality and equity across all aspects of food systems and that also promote sustainable food systems growth and transformation. Women and gender considerations can no longer be an afterthought to programming; rather they have to be at the core of interventions and behavioral change campaigns.

• **Foster inclusive behavioral change**: To accelerate the transition to non-discriminatory governance structures at all levels, programming interventions must also sensitize boys and men to the challenges that undermine the empowerment of girls and women. Behavioral change programming must address unequal power dynamics and social norms, and foster an understanding of why gender equality is mutually beneficial and the role that boys and men can play in promoting empowerment.

• **Tailor products and services for women**: Products, services, and tools must be tailored to meet the specific economic and social needs and circumstances of women and must be made easily accessible given current constraints of women’s time use and mobility. This includes making financial as well as extension services more accessible to female producers.

• **Step up on STEM**: A strong educational foundation provides choices for one’s future. To truly and sustainably empower women in the food system, education and training for girls and women on pertinent subjects must be readily accessible. This includes education in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subjects, on healthy diets and nutrition, on entrepreneurship, and on modern farming techniques and technologies.

• **Collect data for accountability**: Although progress has been made, comprehensive and reliable data reflecting women’s participation in and contribution to African food systems remains limited. This complicates the tracking of progress and the identification of gaps so that interventions and policies can be better targeted. The post-Malabo agenda is an opportunity for countries to re-commit to consistently and comprehensively report on the CAADP indicator relating to women and to integrate food systems elements more consistently in gender disaggregated data collection.