

APBAConf2025 VACS Capacity Side Event 1

Theme: *Unlocking the Potential of Opportunity Crops – Ongoing VACS Activities by CGIAR and Partners in Africa*

Date: October 6, 2025, Time: 2:30 – 5:30 pm | **Venue:** Elephant Hills Resort, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

Background:

Launched in February 2023, the **Vision for Adapted Crops and Soils (VACS)** is a transformative initiative designed to unlock the potential of underutilized “opportunity crops,” strengthen African food systems, and empower the next generation of scientists and farmers. VACS is aligned with the African Union’s Common Position on Food Systems, the AU Green Recovery Action Plan, and the Soil Initiative for Africa. Its goals are to boost productivity of opportunity crops, improve nutrition through climate-resilient cropping systems, revitalize soil health, and expand research and training capacity across the continent. Four flagship activities are being implemented by CGIAR and partners:

Breeding, Bt Pigeonpea, Seed Systems, and Capacity Development.

VACS Breeding Initiative: Targeting seven crops—amaranth, Bambara groundnut, finger millet, okra, pigeon pea, sesame, and taro—this initiative integrates quantitative genetics, genomics, and market intelligence through a stage-gate process. Engagement with farmers, seed companies, processors, and policymakers ensures demand-driven breeding priorities that respond to real-world challenges and livelihood needs.

Bt Pigeonpea Public–Private Partnership: Strengthens breeding pipelines through insect tolerance surveys, product licensing, and stewardship, while ensuring compliance with national biosafety frameworks.

Seed Systems “Quick Wins”: Focused on improving smallholder access to quality seed of nutritious, climate-resilient crops (amaranth, cowpea, mungbean, pearl millet, pigeon pea, finger millet), this activity links farmers to markets, promotes awareness, and stimulates demand for diverse crops.

Capacity Development: Embedded across all activities, this effort trains the next generation of African plant breeders and researchers, working with CGIAR centers, national partners, and universities.

Session Format: The side event will feature Keynote Framing presentations, spotlight talks on flagship initiatives and VACS Fellows, and an interactive high-level panel discussion

Expected Outcomes: We are aiming for greater awareness of VACS activities and their relevance to African food systems, shared understanding of research gaps and collaboration opportunities, actionable recommendations on research, seed systems, and policy priorities, and strengthened networks and partnerships to advance underutilized crops.

Target Audience: Scientists, breeders, scholars, policymakers, and professionals from CGIAR, NARES, universities, the private sector, and other institutions committed to building resilient agrifood systems across Africa.

