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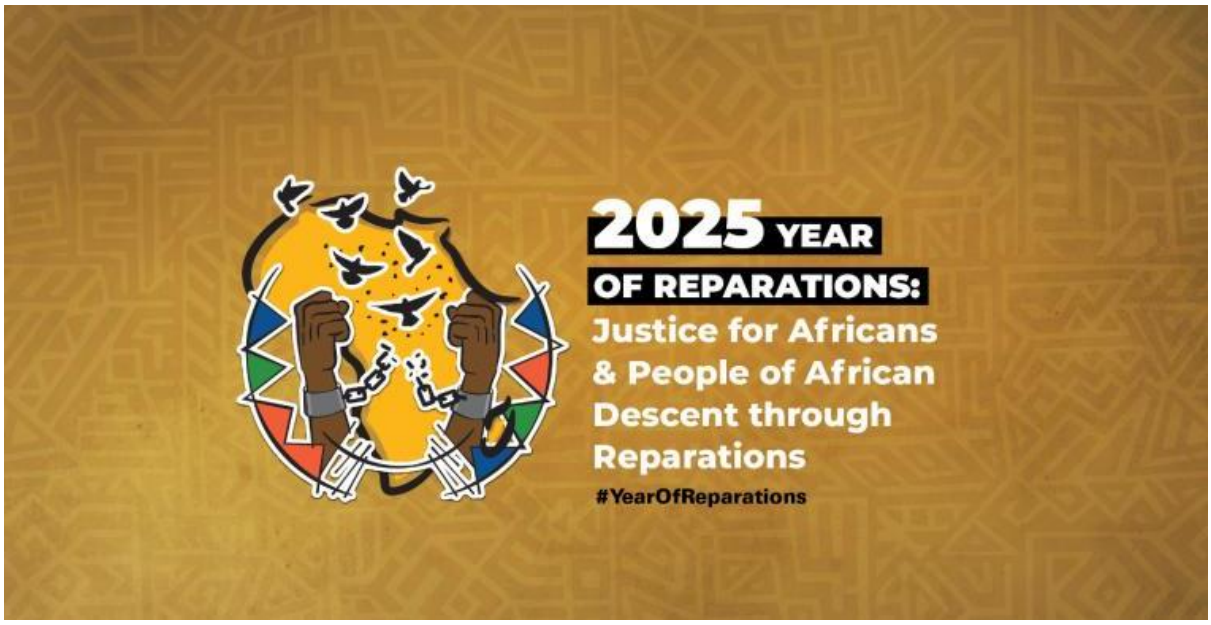

Repatriate Africa's climate-smart wisdom that was suppressed by colonialism.

The urgency of climate change compels us to revisit lost wisdom in the African Agricultural Sector. Dr. Ibrahim Assane Mayaki is African Union Special Envoy for Food Systems observes that extreme weather, erratic rainfall, and rising temperatures threaten the staple crops that dominate global agriculture, necessitating the need to look beyond rice, maize, and wheat—species that account for nearly 50% of the world's calories but are increasingly vulnerable to climate shocks.

"We live in a world where memes, buzzwords, and emotions are slowly taking over discourse like a pernicious fungus forming in a bathtub." I quote these words by George Week because I intend to throw two of my personal favorite buzzwords your way: Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) and reparations. However, these are neither pernicious nor fungal; rather, they are life-sustaining and essential if we are to heal the blight of underdevelopment in Africa. If we are to move beyond rhetoric, these concepts must be translated into action.

The World Bank defines CSA as an integrated approach to managing landscapes—croplands, livestock, forests, and fisheries—while addressing food security and climate challenges. The Food and Agriculture organization (FAO) expands on this definition by emphasizing three core pillars: increasing productivity, enhancing resilience, and reducing emissions. Reparations, on the other hand, refer to the act of making amends for past injustices, typically through financial compensation or other forms of assistance. The African Union has underscored the importance of reparations in its

2025 theme: "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations."

The concept of CSA was first "launched" by the Food and Agriculture Organization in 2010 at the Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security, and Climate Change in The Hague. At the time, 90% of the world's calories came from about 20 plant species, with nearly 50% coming from rice, maize, and wheat alone. Climate change was pushing these crops to their limits. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that extreme weather, erratic rainfall, and rising carbon dioxide levels were already reducing yields in key agricultural regions. The FAO also acknowledged that agricultural sustainability through CSA is as much about power and sovereignty as it is about soil, water, and crops—which brings me to reparations.

Reparations are often understood in financial or political terms, but another crucial dimension exists: the reparation of knowledge. In the context of agriculture, this means restoring the agricultural wisdom that was suppressed or displaced by colonialism, industrialized farming, and external interventions.

Africans have always practiced CSA. We have long employed integrated approaches to managing landscapes—croplands, livestock, forests, and fisheries. Throughout history, African communities have developed ways to increase productivity and enhance resilience in response to shifting climatic conditions. CSA is in our DNA, it is who we are.

Before colonial interventions reshaped African agriculture, communities had well-established farming systems tailored to their environments. African farmers cultivated diverse, climate-resilient crops that sustained communities through droughts and floods. In Ghana, historical records reveal that precolonial farmers in Banda cultivated a wide range of drought-resistant crops and employed agroecological methods that ensured food security even in harsh climates. These farming systems were disrupted by colonial policies that prioritized cash crops for export rather than local food production. Similarly, in Kenya, indigenous agricultural techniques included terracing, intercropping, and the use of natural fertilizers, all of which contributed to sustainable land management. However, colonial authorities overlooked these methods, imposing European-style monoculture that ultimately led to soil degradation and reduced resilience.

Africa's so-called "lost crops"—fonio, teff, millet, sorghum, and cowpea—have nourished communities for millennia. These crops require less water, resist pests, and thrive in poor soils, making them invaluable in a warming world. Yet, modern agricultural investments still prioritize high-input, genetically modified crops designed for monoculture farming. This approach is not only ecologically unsustainable but also economically precarious for smallholder farmers. Governments, researchers, and investors must work together to restore the status of these traditional crops. This requires funding African-led agricultural research, revising seed policies to support biodiversity, and ensuring that smallholder farmers—who produce over 70% of Africa's food—have access to resources that align with local ecologies rather than external market demands.

For climate-smart agriculture (CSA) to thrive in the 21st century, knowledge must flow bidirectionally—policymakers must listen to farmers just as much as farmers adapt to policy changes. It shouldn't be systematic top-down approaches. Too often, agricultural policies are shaped by external institutions with little regard for local realities, yet African farmers have long been adapting to climate change using time-tested techniques like intercropping, agroforestry, and water harvesting. These methods should not be dismissed as outdated but embraced as essential climate adaptation tools. A true reparation of knowledge also demands cross-generational learning, as many young Africans have become disconnected from traditional farming wisdom due to urban migration and the undervaluing of indigenous knowledge in formal education. By embedding CSA principles into school curricula and community training programs, future generations can inherit both the science and the spirit of sustainable agriculture, bridging the gap between ancestral wisdom and modern innovations.

Initiatives such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and the implementation of the successive strategic frameworks within it including the recently adopted 10-year Agricultural Development Strategy (Kampala Declaration), must prioritize resilience-building among African farmers. The African Climate-Smart Agriculture Alliance (ACSAA), established under AU leadership, plays a pivotal role in supporting smallholder farmers with CSA techniques, including drought-resistant crops, agroforestry, and water-efficient irrigation systems—strengthening food security and climate adaptation across the continent. By driving policy, fostering partnerships, and securing financial support, the AU continues to position itself as a key force in the transformation of African agriculture, ensuring that both ancestral knowledge and modern innovation shape a resilient and food-secure future.

One of the biggest hurdles to scaling CSA in Africa is financing. Smallholder farmers lack access to credit, insurance, and subsidies that would enable them to adopt climate-smart practices. International climate funds exist, but they are often bogged down by bureaucracy, making it difficult for African farmers to access them. Governments and development partners must prioritize financing mechanisms that cater to the realities of African agriculture. This includes expanding microfinance and cooperative lending for smallholder farmers, providing incentives for sustainable land management and agro-ecological practices, strengthening regional markets to reduce dependence on volatile global commodity prices, and investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, such as water storage and solar-powered irrigation.

Agricultural sustainability is as much about power and sovereignty as it is about soil, water, and crops. For too long, Africa's food systems have been dictated by external forces—from colonial cash crop economies to structural adjustment programs that weakened local agricultural resilience. To achieve true CSA, Africa must reclaim its agency by ensuring that agricultural policies are driven by local needs, not by global agribusiness interests. The reparation of knowledge means investing in African-led solutions, supporting smallholder farmers, and fostering policies that prioritize biodiversity and resilience over short-term industrial gains. By doing so, we do more than just protect food security—we restore dignity, agency, and the wisdom of generations past.

The path forward is not about reinventing the wheel but about rediscovering what Africa has always known and adding science to it: food sovereignty, climate resilience, and agricultural sustainability are inseparable. The question is no longer whether Climate-Smart Agriculture is achievable—it is whether we are ready to reclaim our ancient knowledge and blend it with emerging scientific knowledge. We have moved historically in harmony with the climate, as Africa is mankind's first home. CSA was born on our soil and given the current realities of climate change —we need to reclaim and repatriate it.

For further information, please contact:

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