



Soil Health news

A WORD FROM THE PROJECT MANAGER...

Africa Soil Health Consortium takes off

Welcome to the first issue of the **Africa Soil Health Consortium (ASHC) project newsletter.**

The economies of most African countries are based on agriculture. However, production and productivity in most sub-Saharan countries remain low. An increase in agricultural productivity will address both the challenge of poverty and hunger of rural people, and benefit the growing numbers of urban poor who have to buy food. A key contributor to low agricultural productivity is low inherent soil fertility.

The ASHC project is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and coordinated by CABI, the international science and agriculture organization.

The project aims to improve knowledge on ISFM at all levels of society in both public and private sectors

From policy makers to university lecturers, extension workers, input suppliers and the farmers themselves, in order for ISFM to contribute to improve livelihoods. We have already put together a multidisciplinary ASHC team composed of a manager, a soil scientist (cropping systems), a

monitoring and evaluation specialist from the International Centre for Soil Improvement and Agricultural Development (IFDC), communication specialists and a technical editor. Also involved are a policy formulation expert and a gender specialist from the UK's Overseas Development Institute.

The team is already developing productive relationships with the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), various research and development initiatives, agrodealers and farmers in different countries, among other partners. As a result we had a successful field visit to meet stakeholders in various East and Central African countries in April, hosted the project's inaugural workshop in May, and have started developing an ISFM handbook and other dissemination materials.

The ASHC team looks forward to working with these and other partners to produce materials that will not only promote awareness of ISFM but also encourage its adoption.

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“Essentially, all life depends upon the soil... There can be no life without soil and no soil without life, they have evolved together.”

(Charles E. Kellogg, USDA Yearbook of Agriculture, 1938)



Improving decision-making for ISFM in sub-Saharan Africa

Poor crop yields in sub-Saharan countries have been partially attributed to poor soil fertility. Over time there has been an increase in population, especially in high potential lands, and the need for food has increased. Therefore farmers have been forced to farm their land more intensively, leading to a decline in use of traditional methods of soil fertility management. For example, instead of allowing fields to rest under fallow, fields are continuously cropped from season to season.

Many smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa do not use enough mineral and organic fertilizers to replace the nutrients that are removed by crops. Therefore the soils get poorer and poorer with each cropping season and production is far below the potential. Clearly, the Green Revolution, which increased production dramatically in Asia and Latin America, has not been experienced by smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Minimal use of soil inputs has been attributed to competition for resources among farm enterprises and household needs, lack of availability of inputs, and high input prices. Also, the poor use of fertilizers may be because farmers' decision-making processes are hampered by information gaps. For example, farmers may be aware that there is a need to use fertilizers when planting – but, faced with the many types of fertilizers on sale, may be unsure of what the “best” fertilizer type and amount would be. Decision support tools are important as they can help farmers fine-tune their decision making.

Decision support tools can help with the diagnosis of constraints, formulation of recommendations (addressing of constraints), simplifying of complex technologies for easier understanding by farmers, and improving understanding of the expected benefits and risks of new technologies. Farmers are then able to compare different technologies and make decisions on how best to use scarce resources to address their problems.

The type of decision support tools that can be used to improve production range from very simple paper tools to complex computer tools. For example, for a maize crop whose leaves are showing signs of yellowing, Leaf Colour Charts can be used to make decisions on the amount of nitrogen fertilizer needed for top-dressing. Furthermore, computers can be used to generate fertilizer recommendations that are site-specific, as well as adjusting fertilizer rates and time of application in respect to changes in rainfall/moisture (e.g. drought conditions) and crop requirements. However, as few farmers have access to computers and the internet in sub-Saharan Africa, there is a need for simple and user-friendly paper-based decision support tools.

The ASHC project in collaboration with partners, is reviewing available tools and their suitability for use in the field, incorporating feedback from existing ISFM initiatives. The project is identifying current simple and user-friendly tools and intends to simplify complex decision support tools for use by farmers. During the inaugural ASHC workshop held in May, the need for different types of decision support tools, ranging from simple to complex, was emphasized.

Some of the ideas discussed were the use of simple decision support tools such as Leaf Colour Charts, spreadsheets (to give an idea of profitability), and labour calendars for identifying peak labour demands. In addition, the use of complex tools to generate different management options, can be explored and presented to farmers as a “basket of management options”.

Some of the information generated using decision support tools can be disseminated to farmers through posters, pamphlets and guides. Also, complex tools can be simplified so that the end-users only need to key in data for a minimum set of parameters for output to be generated. Such tools can then be used through communication pathways such as spreadsheets, phones, call-centres and the internet.

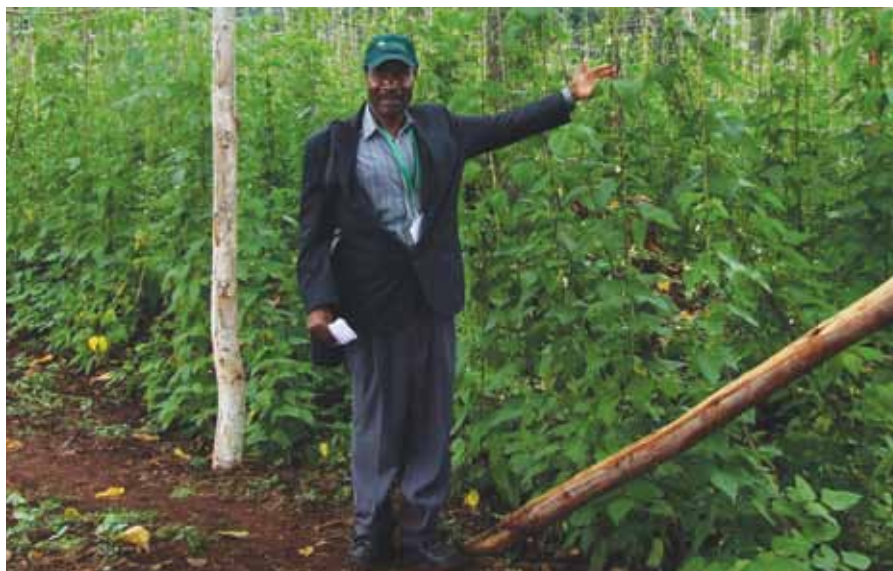
By contributing to the development and use of decision support tools, the project hopes to improve decision-making at a household level, and subsequently improve production and household incomes for smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Scientist showing off climbing beans varieties





Consensus and consultation at the inaugural Africa Soil Health Consortium workshop



Participants at the ASHC inception workshop

Members of the Africa Soil Health Consortium held their inaugural workshop in Nairobi, on 25 and 26 May 2011. The two-day event provided an opportunity for participants to understand better the thinking behind the Consortium and how it will function. It also provided space for them to look for more effective ways of communicating and exchanging information on the broad and often misunderstood subject of soil health within and among the different communities who share an interest in improving farm yields for small holder farmers in Africa.

The workshop invited participation from a number of institutions with a common interest in the subject including the international science and development organization CABI, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Africa Rice Centre, Grameen Foundation, Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), International Centre for Soil Improvement and Agricultural Development (IFDC), CIAT-TSBF (International Centre for Tropical Agriculture – Tropical Soil Biology and Fertility Research Programme) and International Centre for Research on Women among others.

There was consensus on the need to bridge the gap between existing research and knowledge on soil health and its practical application in the farmers' fields. There are also new technologies and proven agronomic practices related to soil health that are yet to be adopted by small-scale farmers in Africa because communication for agriculture is not yet seen as a priority.

During his opening remarks, Project Manager Dr George Oduor said,

“Ours is a link between people who deal with generation of information and those who actually require that information”

The participants also agreed that many opportunities still exist to learn more from the farmers by engaging them as partners in agricultural service delivery.

Kelly Stenhoff, one of the project team members said,

“At the end of the project's three-year lifespan, we will not be judged successful by the sheer number of demonstration plots, leaflets or posters we have produced and disseminated, but by their impact”

“What potential do these extension materials and approaches have for changing the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of farmers, agrodealers, extension workers or policy makers in our target areas?”

Despite the overall success of the workshop, there was general agreement that there needs to be more clarity on the specific roles of each of the partner institutions. There is need for the project to find ways of exploiting the diverse and unique fields of expertise that each brings.

Apart from encouraging the development and use of better quality extension materials, the project will also consolidate the vast pool of knowledge on soil health through publishing a handbook that will guide researchers interested in the subject.

George Oduor said that implementation of the project would require input from various experts in the field who will form part of team called the Technical Advisory Group (TAG).

This group will offer technical advice in areas such as science, agricultural economics, policy formulation and advocacy, gender, communication and extension among others.

Partners felt that there is a demand for simple illustrative information which is not available. Emphasis was thus put on improving the accessibility of information generated from scientific research.

Thomas Fairhurst, a tropical crop consultant, gave a summary of a proposed pocket guide touching on diagnosis and treatment of nutrient deficiencies in major crops grown in the region. The booklet is aimed at raising awareness on incidence and prevalence of deficiency symptoms and their impact on crop productivity in Africa. It will feature commentaries on soil fertility indicators, nutrient deficiency symptoms and crop information. Partners agreed that the booklet is indeed useful and suggested that such material be used to train extension workers.

Another key issue brought before members was the cropping system used among small scale farmers and how this determines levels of productivity. Dannie Romney, Project Executive for CABI in Africa, raised this subject in the workshop as she spoke on the need to prioritize cropping systems in different areas.

According to Dannie the criteria used to select the priority cropping systems where the project will focus included: existing transport and market infrastructures, water availability, supportive government policies and high probability of small scale farmers benefiting from the systems.

At the end of the workshop, members felt that the objectives were achieved and that they had a better understanding of the project. Teamwork, enthusiasm, participation, willingness and interest of various partners to collaborate helped ensure the success of the workshop.

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Improving the quality of soil health extension materials

“In the area of soil health, the challenge is not a lack of sufficient knowledge on the subject; rather it is in putting this knowledge into use for poor farmers”

(Dr. Tsedeke Abate)

(Dr. Tsedeke Abate works with the Tropical Legumes II Project, a joint initiative that aims to increase productivity and production of legumes and the income of poor farmers in the region).

The Africa Soil Health Consortium (ASHC) recognizes the fact that there are barriers of varying proportions which inhibit the effective transfer of results of research and development work into practical application on the farmers' fields.

Dr John Ojiem, the acting Centre Director at Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) in Kakamega said, “The issue of dissemination and even the format in which we disseminate research outputs is going to be a very crucial part of our work because, as researchers, many of us do not have the skills or the training required to communicate effectively with the very people we're trying to research for—the farmers.

“We can come up with innovative technologies on improving soil health and enhancing productivity, but if we don't synthesize those technologies, package them and communicate them effectively to the end-user, they are utterly useless. By working together with organizations like CABI, which have the expertise in agricultural extension, I think we can go a long way towards fulfilling our goals in this important area of soil health,” he added.

Governments in Africa are recognizing the need to improve agricultural extension approaches and significant progress has already been made towards developing quality agricultural extension materials. Indeed, this was one of the main motives behind the formation of the ASHC and the reason for selection of CABI,

an organization with over 100 years' experience in publications and production of high quality extension materials, to lead this project. However, during a recent visit to several countries in East and Central Africa, the ASHC team noted that there is a discernible gap in the availability of quality and effective information and communication materials for use by farmers on the topic of soil health.

Our discussions with Phamines Vikiru, a woman farmer from Vihiga district in Western Kenya confirmed this. “A while back we received some booklets from one of the projects but many of us found them too detailed and we could not easily understand them: the language used was difficult to understand. However officers from the project came and translated them for us, they showed us how to use inoculum fertilizer and we can now see its benefits.”

“From our experience, nothing beats the face to face interaction with farmers,” said Ms Celister Kaleha, an officer working with Resource Projects Kenya. “However when you want to spread the word about these technologies or promote the use of good agronomic practices to the wider district, then we need a different approach.

“Once we have explained to farmers how they can apply these technologies in their farms, we can add value if we leave some reference material behind so that they can share this knowledge with other interested farmers. In the past we tried to distribute a booklet called ‘the Master Farmer,’ but we quickly realized that it was not really written with the farmer in mind. It was more for the extension worker; it was in English and the language used was a bit too scientific,” she said.

For efficient and effective fertilizer use, the format in which information is presented has to be suitable for farmers to understand and act upon. During our country visits, we found that the many of the information booklets in use were very informative, but needed to be simplified further and reduced to a single page or two to give farmers a chance of benefiting

from their content. They should also include lots of pictures and illustrations or perhaps be presented in poster form.

Celister said, “When we talk to the farmers, we try to avoid complex words, and phrases that we commonly use when talking to each other. If you talk about the Nitrogen cycle, or rhizobia many of the mamas (women farmers) here will not understand what you are saying. But when you uproot a bean plant for instance and show them the small balls growing from the roots (nodules), and explain in a simplified way the significance of the nodules in improving the fertility of their soils, many of them can understand. I think the same approach should be applied when developing easy-to-read extension materials on soil health for farmers.”

One element that is conspicuously missing in many agricultural extension efforts in Africa is the element of persuasion. David Amudavi, an agricultural extension expert working with Biovision Foundation in Kenya, said, “In many cases persuasion is what influences behaviour change, and determines how quickly the gap between field trials and adoption of these technologies and practices by farmers is bridged. If the information given to farmers about soil health is packaged in an appealing way, it has a higher chance of influencing their perceptions.”

We spoke to another farmer, Francis Sakula from Malava, Western Kenya, who uses lime fertilizer in his tree nursery to reduce the acidity of his soils. “When Mr Mbakaya (a researcher) introduced this lime fertilizer and taught us how to use it, I first applied it on my trees. I would mix it with the soil and put it into small paper packets before planting my tree seedlings. I don't know what was in my soils but since I started using the lime fertilizer, I have seen a big difference even despite the poor rains.”

When asked how he would prefer to receive similar information and tips in future, Francis said he enjoyed the personal face-to-face interaction.



"I find farm demonstration plots set up by extension workers very useful because I can see for myself what is working. I can ask the research or extension officers to explain the techniques and learn directly from them. If you want to reach more farmers you should use radio, because that is what we listen to here," he added.

In Africa, it is widely accepted that radio is a very important and potent tool for transmitting information to wide audiences, especially rural smallholder farmers. However, with the advent of FM and community radio, audiences have become increasingly fragmented.

"When making public new information about agricultural innovations we have found that short, targeted messages through radio are among the best options. When we went out into the villages we even found very young children reciting the jingles and messages we had broadcast through radio. This proves that there is indeed increased awareness and that we have been successful"

This was a comment by Silvain Hakizimana, a project worker with Catholic Relief Services in Rwanda.

Worth noting is that communication approaches vary in different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and whether or not farmers adopt knowledge on soil health will be dependent on several factors including their location, socioeconomic status, wealth, gender, age, education, religion, and whether they own any livestock.

Importance is thus placed on the appropriate means or mix of approaches to target specific groups of farmers. Sylvain says, "In urban areas, many people do not have the time to listen to farm radio, therefore we opt to distribute pamphlets and put up big posters in strategic places such as district headquarters and offices. Women too perceive our messages differently."

"Before we set out to produce any materials we first consult the relevant Government institutions, through the Ministry of Agriculture (ISAR) and the Agriculture Information and Communication Centre (CICA), and we work closely with them through the entire process. We also involve the farmers during the entire process and we test the materials several times before rolling out the final products. For example, we may go to the field with draft pamphlets or posters containing some

captioned pictures and analyse them with a selected group of farmers.

"This method has been helpful to us as it helps us to know whether the information we intend to give out will be fully understood by the farmers and whether it is likely to be adopted. The same goes for the radio programs where we select a sample of the target audience and have them listen to the recording; afterwards, we hold focus group discussions where they tell us what they have heard and learnt," he says.

One of the key objectives of the Africa Soil Health Consortium is to use a peer-review based approach to the collation and synthesis of existing knowledge and materials from other ongoing initiatives to make recommendations on how to improve the quality and distribution of high quality and effective materials to farmers. Each of these materials will be carefully planned as part of a broader scale-up strategy to ensure it achieves targeted goals. At the end of the process, the project aims for better trained institutions, with the knowledge and skills to produce high quality extension materials on soil health.

Marsden Momanyi

Frank Sakula, a farmer from Isanjiro village, in Malava, Western Kenya who uses lime fertilizer in his nursery to neutralize the acidity of his soils





Milestones achieved by the African Soil Health Consortium

Since its inception, the Africa Soil Health Consortium (ASHC) project has embarked on several activities with the aim of ensuring that much needed information on soil health gathered through scientific research is able to reach smallholder farmers and have a greater impact on overall crop production.

The inaugural workshop of the ASHC project, held earlier in the year in Nairobi, brought together various partner institutions involved in soil health initiatives in order to agree a strategy on developing extension materials for farmers.

During the workshop, a Technical Advisory Group was formed, chaired by Dr Peter Okoth of CIAT-TSBF. The group offers guidance on project activities as well as advice on technical subjects such as gender and policy.

In addition, the ASHC has engaged new staff, bringing on board expertise in different fields such as agronomy, editing, information management, and communication. A gender consultant, who is to advise on gender-sensitive approaches to communicating soil health information to farmers, has joined the team.

Successful visits to countries in East and Central Africa – Kenya, Rwanda, DR Congo and Tanzania – by members of staff resulted in the identification of institutions that the project could collaborate with, as well as key cropping systems which will be targeted in the ASHC project.

Another achievement is the development of an Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM) handbook which is already under way. The handbook is a fundamental, easy-to-use manual for extension workers.

It covers broad research subjects like soil fertility assessment, nutrient and crop management, nutrient sources and farming systems analysis. It is expected to be published in the near future.

The project has also seen the production of draft posters and a nutrient deficiency pocket guide, which contains information on diagnosis and treatment of nutrient deficiencies in major crops. The structure of the guide will be finalized after appropriate consultation.

Other milestones achieved by the ASHC project include:

- the development of list of institutions and individuals involved in ISFM and how they interact with each other
- the creation of the ASHC website
- development of partnerships with appropriate institutions undertaking relevant research and development initiatives in soil health
- developing relevant agreements between CABI and key partners in the management of the ASHC project

Activities in the pipeline during the first year of implementing the project include contracting production teams to produce footage to be used in production of videos on principles of ISFM; production of radio scripts; and the establishment of local Product Development Teams who will produce demand-driven, site-specific communication products in different formats such as leaflets and posters in at least one of the four project countries.

It is expected that compendia of high-quality communication tools will be produced. Lastly, a Monitoring and Evaluation plan and a Gender Strategy will be developed.

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Nankafo Mwabahinzi, farmer holding soil



What's behind the ASHC project?

Poor soil fertility is a key constraint to improving farm productivity and farmer livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). After several decades of emphasis on organic approaches to soil fertility improvement (partly because lack of fertilizer availability was itself a major constraint) there is now wide recognition of the need to integrate increased fertilizer use with other aspects of soil fertility management.

Most organizations and scientists now recognize that integrated soil fertility management (ISFM), involving the use of (comparatively) small amounts of mineral fertilizers – in combination with other best practices such as the use of organic materials available on-farm – is essential and has proved effective to increase productivity in farming systems in SSA where, over the past 20 years, fertilizer use has stagnated or even declined.

There are many on-going initiatives that are working to introduce and implement ISFM. Whilst these initiatives aim to contribute to improved livelihoods, in many cases they lack extension information and decision support tools in formats suitable for the target groups. And although there is a huge wealth of new information on farming systems development in SSA published in peer-reviewed literature, little work has been done to synthesize and disseminate this knowledge in ways that will appeal to

people involved in farming systems development. Different stakeholders need different kinds of information, access information in different ways, and need sound evidence to inform their decisions.

The Africa Soil Health Consortium project aims to provide a platform that helps link practitioners involved in on-going development initiatives access knowledge generated by scientists from research institutes in the region and internationally. A Technical Advisory Group (TAG), comprising individuals who have played a key role in research and implementation of ISFM in SSA and have expertise in key areas, met at an inception workshop for the project, where they discussed key strategies for collating and providing information. As well as producing materials that describe generic ISFM approaches and use of ISFM in specific cropping systems, activities will support product development teams to generate customized material for specific target audiences, including different gender and socioeconomic groupings. These will support productivity improvements through soil health interventions including the efficient and effective use of fertilizers.

The project will aim to engage with stakeholders across sub-Saharan Africa to ensure that the information needs of as many stakeholders as possible who are working to introduce and use ISFM effectively, are addressed

There will also be more intensive activities in Tanzania, Mozambique, Mali and Ghana, allowing direct engagement with stakeholders in those countries.

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George Oduor
Project Manager



George has a PhD in Applied Entomology from the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Previously working at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), he has over 20 years' experience in the development, implementation and coordination of national and regional multi-institutional research and development projects in the tropics. He has a keen interest in the developmental aspects of participatory agricultural research. He recently coordinated a multi-million US\$ project in Angola on the rehabilitation of the coffee sector, previously devastated by civil war. He has experience in working in over 15 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and speaks Portuguese, besides English and Kiswahili.

Lydia Wairegi
Post-Doctoral Fellow, Cropping Systems



Lydia holds a PhD in Production Ecology and Resource Conservation from the Wageningen University, The Netherlands. She has over 20 years' experience in agricultural research and development. She is currently working as a "Cropping Systems" Post-Doctoral Fellow in the ASHC project. She previously worked at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in Uganda as a consultant/student on banana systems. She also worked as a biological crop inoculant expert at Cropserve Zambia Limited, in Zambia, as a volunteer under Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO). In addition, Lydia also worked as an agronomist at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI).



KARI Embu staff

Kelly Stenhoff

M&E Specialist



Kelly joins the ASHC team under attachment from her employer, the International Centre for Soil Improvement and Agricultural Development (IFDC). Kelly works with IFDC's East and Southern Africa Division (ESAFD) as a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Specialist. She has broad knowledge and experience in agricultural enterprise development; monitoring and evaluation; institutional development; education and engineering. She holds a MSc in Public Policy and Management from Carnegie Mellon's Heinz School of Public Policy and a BSc in Chemical Engineering from the University of Minnesota.

Dannie Romney

Project Executive



Dannie joined CABI Africa in February 2008 as the Coordinator for Knowledge and Innovation Systems. She has a PhD in ruminant nutrition from Newcastle University and 18 years' experience of designing, implementing and managing research and development projects in tropical and temperate environments. She previously worked for the Natural Resources Institute (NRI) in the UK on projects in Africa and Asia, before joining the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) in 1999. At CABI in Nairobi her remit is now to oversee all projects within the knowledge for development theme.

Florence Chege

Project Support



Florence Chege is an environmental expert with 20 years' experience in various aspects of natural resource management, agro forestry, dry land farming and community engagement. She has an MSc in Forestry Science majoring in public participation. Florence is taking lead in pulling together databases of soil projects in Africa, Stakeholders and institutions working on various soil-related projects.

Abigael Mchana

Intern, Communications



Abigael is a communication graduate with a specialization in broadcast journalism. She has worked as a radio presenter/producer and as a television news reporter and has experience in video editing, script writing, and TV/radio presentation. She has an interest in disseminating information through the media that will positively impact agricultural development initiatives in Africa.

Caroline K. Nyakundi

Communication Specialist



Caroline joined CABI as a Communications Specialist this year. Caroline is well versed in communications and editorial work and has successfully accomplished a number of communications-related projects for Non-Governmental organizations and Government projects. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Information Sciences from Moi University and currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies at the University of Nairobi.

Rodney Witman Lunduka

Post-Doctoral Fellow, Policy



Rodney is a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Africa Soil Health Consortium (ASHC) Project. He is an expert in Natural Resources and Environmental Economics, Developmental Economics, Econometrics, Project Evaluation and Impact Assessment. Rodney holds a PhD in Development and Resources Economics from the University of Life Science in Norway, he obtained a Master's of Science in Environmental Science from the University of London, Imperial College at Wye and a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (Agricultural Engineering option) at the Bunda College of Agriculture University, Malawi. He has conducted a number of research projects in environmental natural resource economics, specifically in land tenure and adoption of soil and water conservation technologies by smallholder farmers in Malawi.

Jane Frances Asaba

Information and Communication Coordinator



Jane is Coordinator, Information and Communication for Development at CABI in Africa. She holds an MSc in Information Science and a BSc in Agriculture. She has more than 25 years' experience in information management; twelve of these years have been with CABI. Her work focuses on promoting access to knowledge and information in order to support decision making in agriculture and natural resources. Jane Frances is involved in project development and implementation, often working with multi-stakeholder teams.

Thomas Fairhurst

Technical Editor



Thomas set up Tropical Crop Consultants Ltd in 2008 to provide consultancy services in tropical crop agronomy and management. The overall focus of the consultancy service is to assist clients with ecological and sustainable crop intensification in lowland, upland and plantation agriculture systems. In the past Mr. Fairhurst has served as the Director of Agriculture at Cargill CTP Holding, East and Southeast Asia Programs at International Plant Nutrition Institute, and as an Agronomy Advisor at Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH.

Mr Collins Abuga Marita

Monitoring and Evaluation Assistant



Collins joins the ASHC team under attachment from his employer, the International Centre for Soil Improvement and Agricultural Development (IFDC) where he is a Monitoring and Evaluation M&E Assistant. Collins has experience in market and development research with competencies in statistics, project coordination, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge management and value chain analysis. He holds a Bsc. In Agricultural Economics, a Diploma in business, Certificate in statistics and is currently pursuing a Masters degree in Research Methods at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology.