

Africa's bean sector is moving beyond the push for higher yields as researchers, governments and businesses seek varieties that can improve nutrition, withstand climate pressures and create new opportunities for farmers and traders.

The shift was highlighted Monday in Kigali as the Pan-Africa Bean Research Alliance (PABRA) marked 30 years of coordinating bean research and innovation across Africa.

The anniversary event, themed **“PABRA Beyond #30, and Beyond Beans,”** brought together researchers, government officials, farmers, seed companies, traders and development partners to reflect on three decades of bean research and discuss the future of the sector.



Jean Claude Rubyogo, Director of PABRA and Global Bean Program Leader at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT

About 150 million people in Africa regularly eat beans, making the crop an important source of food and nutrition as well as an increasingly important commercial commodity, said Jean Claude Rubyogo, PABRA director and Global Bean Program leader at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT.

Since its establishment in 1996, PABRA has helped release 624 improved bean varieties and reached more than 46 million farmers, 58% of them women, Rubyogo said.

The alliance grew from three regional bean research networks that were operating nearly a decade before PABRA was formally established, with support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The idea was to bring national research programs together so countries could share breeding materials, knowledge and technologies.

“Why don’t we come together?” Rubyogo recalled asking at the time. “Today we have a strong network of national programmes working as one regional system.”

Juan Lucas Restrepo, director general of the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, said PABRA’s contribution goes beyond beans.

“It is not about beans per se,” Restrepo said. “It is about the economic opportunities

they create,” particularly for women and young people and through stronger links between farmers and markets.

Rwanda’s role in bean research

Rwanda has been both a beneficiary and contributor to the regional research network, said Florence Uwamahoro, director general of the Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board.

She cited RWR 2245, RWR 3194, RWR 2154 and RWR 1129 among varieties bred in Rwanda and shared through PABRA’s regional networks.

Rubyogo said climbing beans accounted for about 5% of Rwanda’s bean-growing area in 1985 but now cover about 45%. Six or seven varieties bred in Rwanda are now grown in countries including Tanzania, Uganda, Cameroon and Burundi.

The anniversary discussions also highlighted the growing links between research, seed businesses, nutrition and markets.



Emma Uwera, founder of I&J Harvest Seed Company

Emma Uwera, founder of I&J Harvest Seed Company, said PABRA and RAB’s bean program influenced her career and helped her company expand from supplying seed in eastern Rwanda to selling across the country.

“Farmers believe what they see,” Uwera said, referring to demonstration plots where farmers can follow new varieties from planting to maturity before deciding whether to buy seed.

From research to markets and nutrition

Rose Kabuye, a grain trader and off-taker, said buyers increasingly favor beans that cook quickly and provide better returns, while poor-quality grain remains a challenge, particularly for institutional buyers such as school feeding programs.



Rtd. Col Rose Kabuye, a grain trader

Speakers also discussed biofortified crops, school gardens and climate-smart agriculture as ways of linking bean research with nutrition.

Dr. Olivier Kamana, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Resources, called for continued investment in these areas as part of Rwanda's wider agricultural transformation agenda.

Dr. Eliud Birachi, project leader for markets and business development at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, said PABRA's commodity corridor approach now covers about 10 corridors across Africa, involving around 200 enterprises.

The discussions also looked beyond beans, with participants considering how the demand-led, corridor-based approach could be extended to crops such as groundnuts and sorghum as PABRA prepares its 2027-2037 strategy.

The alliance now brings together more than 934 partners across 31 countries.

As PABRA enters its next phase, speakers said stronger partnerships will be needed to respond to climate change, pests and diseases, changing consumer preferences and nutritional challenges.

The anniversary discussions reflected a broader shift in the sector: from simply developing improved bean varieties to ensuring they reach farmers, businesses and consumers who can benefit from them.