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Editorial [Volume 26 No. 9 (2026)]

This issue is dedicated to this year's World Food Prize Winner, Prof. Dr. h. c. Huub Lelieveld

> *"My philosophy is, if you can help, then help. My drive is to help people with this objective: safe food for everybody." Huub Lelieveld - 2026 World Food Prize Laureate*

Before Hunger Wins: Taking Science to the Farmer and ensuring what is produced is saved for food and feed

The theme "Before Hunger Wins" of the 2026 Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue, held in Des Moines, Iowa, from 20–22 October, is both a warning and a call to action. As the global community reflects on four decades of the World Food Prize, we must confront an uncomfortable reality: despite significant advances in agricultural science, technology and food production, hunger and malnutrition continue to undermine human dignity, health and development. The challenge before us is not simply to discover more solutions, but to ensure that the knowledge and innovations already available reach the people who need them most. For Africa, this challenge is particularly urgent. Millions of smallholder farmers depend on increasingly unpredictable rainfall, while high production costs, limited market access, inadequate storage, and post-harvest losses undermine their ability to feed their families and earn a decent livelihood. Climate variability, conflict, poverty and inequality further weaken food systems. When harvests fail, or food prices rise, vulnerable households may reduce the quantity and quality of their meals, withdraw children from school or sell productive assets to survive. Preventing such situations requires us to anticipate food crises and act before they become entrenched.

Taking science to the farmer

Dr Norman Borlaug understood that we must ultimately judge scientific achievement by its impact on people. In reflecting on his legacy, I have emphasised his desire to see impact where it mattered most: at the farmer level. This remains an important lesson for agricultural scientists today. Yes, a lot has been achieved. We have come a long way. However, given surging challenges of climate variability and conflicts, it looks like what we thought we had achieved is quickly being erased.

Too often, the success of research is measured by publications, citations, promotions, and institutional recognition. These have their place, but they cannot be the final measure of scientific achievement. We must also ask: Has our research helped a farmer improve productivity? Has it reduced losses, increased income, improved soil fertility or enabled a family to eat a more diverse and nutritious diet?

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Science must leave the laboratory and reach the farm, the household, the marketplace and the policy-making table. Researchers should work alongside farmers to identify their needs, test practical solutions and learn from local experience. Technologies must be affordable, accessible and appropriate to the conditions in which farmers operate. Farmers should not be an afterthought in the research process, but a central partner in shaping priorities and assessing impact. This is especially important for African agricultural research. We have capable scientists, innovative farmers and institutions with considerable knowledge. The challenge is to strengthen the links between research, extension services, government programmes, markets and communities so that scientific advances translate into measurable improvements in people's lives.

Food production must lead to better nutrition

The fight against hunger cannot end with increased agricultural production. Producing more maize, rice, wheat and other staples is important, but food security must also mean access to sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious diets. A person may consume enough calories and still suffer from deficiencies of essential vitamins and minerals. At the same time, overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases are increasing in many African communities. Undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and excessive consumption of unhealthy foods can coexist within the same population and even the same household. This double burden of malnutrition demands a broader understanding of how agriculture contributes to human health.

My longstanding advocacy for integrating nutrition into agricultural research and development reflects this reality. During my service with the Sasakawa Africa Association, I sought to strengthen attention to women, children and nutrition, building on existing work such as quality protein maize. Yet making nutrition a stronger institutional priority was not always easy. Agriculture programmes have often concentrated on staple crop production and the immediate objective of fighting hunger. We must now go further. Agriculture should contribute to dietary diversity, nutritional quality and food safety, as well as production and income. Farmers need support to grow and access a wider range of foods, including vegetables, fruits, legumes and appropriate animal-source foods. Research must consider not only yields, but also nutrient composition, storage, processing, food safety and affordability.

Nutrition should not be treated as an additional activity introduced after agricultural programmes have been designed. It must be integrated into their objectives, budgets, implementation and evaluation from the beginning, as we promote diverse, safe diets.

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Smallholder farmers, women and young people must be central

Smallholder farmers are essential to Africa's food systems, yet many face persistent barriers to finance, land, agricultural inputs, technology, extension services and markets. Women often carry substantial responsibilities for food production, preparation and family nutrition while having less access to the resources needed to improve their livelihoods. Young people require meaningful opportunities to participate in agriculture, food processing, technology and agribusiness. For women particularly, we must reach them where they are. If we are serious about preventing hunger, these groups must be recognised as partners and innovators rather than passive beneficiaries. Supporting women farmers can strengthen household livelihoods and food security. Engaging young people in agricultural innovation can create employment while renewing interest in farming as a modern and productive enterprise. Innovation and technology are attracting young people to agriculture.

School agriculture also deserves greater attention. When children learn to grow food, understand nutrition and appreciate the relationship between agriculture and the environment, they acquire practical skills and develop a sense of responsibility for their communities. Such experiences can nurture future scientists, entrepreneurs and responsible citizens. Agricultural education should, therefore, be part of a broader investment in leadership, skills and the future of food systems.

Climate resilience, value addition and local solutions

Erratic rainfall, droughts, floods and declining soil fertility threaten the livelihoods of farmers across many parts of Africa. Building resilience requires investments in climate-adapted crops, water management, healthy soils, appropriate agricultural technologies and reliable information. It also requires farmers to have access to markets and financial services that help them withstand shocks.

Value addition is another important part of the solution. Better storage and processing can reduce post-harvest losses, extend the availability of seasonal foods, improve food safety and create new products. Small-scale agro-processing can generate income and employment, particularly for rural women and young people. These activities can connect agricultural production more directly to improved diets and stronger local economies. However, innovations must respond to real needs. Technology alone cannot solve hunger if farmers cannot afford it, if roads and markets are inadequate, or if vulnerable households cannot purchase the food that is produced. Investments must, therefore, combine scientific innovation with infrastructure, education, appropriate financing and supportive policies.

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Partnerships and the right to food

No single institution can eliminate hunger. Governments, universities, research organisations, farmers' groups, civil society, consumer groups, the private sector and development partners must work together. Governments have a particular responsibility to establish enabling policies, invest in public goods and ensure that vulnerable populations are not left behind. Partnerships must also be accountable. Their success should be measured by the improvements they deliver to farmers and consumers, not simply by the number of projects undertaken or meetings convened. Research findings must inform policy and practice, while the experiences of farmers and communities must help shape research priorities. The right to adequate food must remain central to these efforts. Access to food is not merely a question of availability; it also concerns affordability, safety, nutritional quality and people's ability to obtain food with dignity. Early-warning systems, reliable data and anticipatory action can help governments and communities respond before a poor harvest or price shock develops into a severe food and nutrition crisis.

Before hunger wins, we must act

The 2026 Norman Borlaug Dialogue challenges us to consider what must be done now to prevent hunger from determining the future of millions of people. The scientific knowledge, agricultural innovations, and practical experience required to make progress already exist. What is needed is greater urgency, more effective implementation and a stronger commitment to ensuring that the benefits reach those most at risk. Dr Borlaug's legacy reminds us that science matters when it changes lives. For agricultural research, this means keeping farmers at the centre. For food systems, it means connecting production with nutrition, food safety and livelihoods. For governments and development partners, it means investing in people, building resilience and turning commitments into action.

At AJFAND, we believe that African scientific knowledge must contribute directly to solving Africa's food and nutrition challenges. Research must be communicated, understood, applied, and evaluated in terms of its contribution to human well-being. The distance between scientific discovery and the farmer's field must become shorter, and the connection between agricultural production and good nutrition must become stronger. Before hunger wins, we must ensure that science serves people, agriculture nourishes communities, and no one is left behind. Our measure of success must not be what we publish or harvest alone, but whether families are better nourished, farmers are more resilient, and future generations have a fair opportunity to live healthy and productive lives. This year at the forum, there was greater integration of livestock. For Africa, this is important; so are insects, fish, honey, wild fruits and herbs, and green leafy vegetables.

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So, there is enough to work with to fulfill our goal of greater prosperity for smallholder farmers through robust food systems and having them fully participate. We need to do more.

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