

From Hoe to Innovation: Reforming IP for Gambian Agriculture

Before there were ministries, markets, or modern borders, there was land. In the earliest age of hunting and gathering, survival depended on understanding seasons, soil, water sources, and wild crops. Knowledge was shared orally. Seeds were selected carefully. Communities observed which plants survived drought, which ripened faster, which resisted pests. Agriculture began as accumulated wisdom passed from one generation to another.

The transition from hunting and gathering to settled farming transformed human civilization. Crop domestication created stability. Food surplus enabled trade. Trade built towns. Towns built states. At every stage, knowledge was the invisible engine of progress.

Today, agriculture stands at another turning point. Climate change, population growth, and global competition demand subsistence. They demand innovation. The question before The Gambia is clear, will we protect and reward agricultural innovation, or will we allow it to remain vulnerable and underdeveloped?

The Intellectual Property Bills currently before the National Assembly present a strategic opportunity. Their agricultural provisions, including plant variety protection and geographical indications, are abstract legal concepts. They are tools for survival and growth.

Under the Arusha Protocol adopted within the African Regional Intellectual Property Organization framework, African states can protect new plant varieties developed through research and breeding. Membership alignment with global systems such as the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants ensures that breeders' rights are recognized internationally. The World Intellectual Property Organization continues to support countries integrating intellectual property into development strategies.

Why does this matter for The Gambia?

Because agriculture is no longer defined solely by rainfall and manual labour. It is shaped by improved seed varieties, data-driven crop management, irrigation technologies, branding strategies, and export certification systems. Countries across West Africa are already moving decisively. Nigeria applies artificial intelligence and blockchain to agricultural supply chains. Ghana strengthens cocoa traceability systems. Côte d'Ivoire integrates climate data into crop monitoring. Benin and Burkina Faso are embedding intellectual property into national agricultural policies. Through the Organisation Africaine de la Propriété Intellectuelle, several francophone states operate a unified system for patents and plant variety protection.

The Gambia must not remain on the margins of this transformation.

Climate pressures are intensifying. Farmers require high-yield, drought-resistant, and disease-tolerant seeds. Research institutions need legal assurance that new varieties will be protected. Investors require certainty. Small and Medium-sized Enterprises need trademarks

to safeguard Gambian agricultural brands in export markets. Geographical indications can elevate distinctive local products and secure market value.

Intellectual property reform creates incentives. Incentives stimulate research. Research produces resilient crops. Resilient crops strengthen food security.

There are concerns regarding awareness among farmers and the relationship between formal legal systems and traditional seed practices. These concerns deserve structured education, consultation, and practical safeguards. Passing the Bills establishes the legal architecture. Implementation must include farmer sensitisation, access to information, and balanced regulation that respects customary practices while promoting innovation.

Agriculture began with observation and adaptation. It now requires legislation and protection.

The National Assembly stands before a defining decision. Approving the Intellectual Property Bills signals readiness to compete regionally, attract responsible investment, and secure the agricultural future of the nation. It reinforces the 2018–2023 national IP strategy's commitment to building a knowledge-based economy with agriculture at its core.

From the age of seed selection by hand to the age of climate-smart innovation, progress has always depended on valuing knowledge. The Gambia's farmers have preserved knowledge for centuries. It is time to protect it, modernize it, and position it for global relevance.

The Bills must pass. The future of Gambian agriculture demands it.