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Food Systems
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African Food Systems Transformation Collective **BRIEF SERIES | 11**

Urban Food Governance at the Subnational Scale



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This brief is part of a series produced by
the African Food Systems Transformation Collective (AFSTC).

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SUMMARY

Africa's rapid urbanisation, particularly in smaller cities, strains local governments' capacity to address challenges such as infrastructure, service delivery, poverty, hunger and climate change (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 2018). With limited authority and resources, these governments struggle to provide essential services including food security, which is critical for health and economic stability (Smit 2016; Battersby & Watson 2019). As a result, African cities lack effective policy frameworks to manage urban food systems.

This brief examines urban food governance at the sub-national level. Drawing on literature, case studies and interviews, it advocates for agroecology-driven, multi-level governance for sustainable food systems.

The FAO and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives–Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) outline pathways for urban food system transformation, including developing integrated food policies, enhancing public food procurement, investing in infrastructure, fostering territorial linkages, creating inclusive finance systems, supporting data management, promoting urban agriculture, integrating food in urban planning, leading climate action and reducing food waste and loss (FAO & ICLEI 2021; ICLEI 2023). Key levers for transition include multi-stakeholder dialogues, fostering knowledge exchange, ensuring inclusivity, linking dialogue to action and institutionalisation.

Key recommendations for philanthropic investment into urban food systems are:

- I Investing in cities already pursuing food system transitions:** By funding multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) that include national actors, operationalising food councils and supporting policy development and implementation. Philanthropists can fund research and advocacy for urban food policies that integrate agroecology, climate resilience and social equity.
- I Building the capacity of local governance actors:** To set their own priorities and improve on food policy integration and budgeting. This can include enabling data-driven decision-making and knowledge-sharing to enhance policy design.
- I Supporting the scaling up of successful initiatives and their replication:** In other cities, particularly intermediate cities.
- I Strengthening civil society participation in food governance:** By supporting neighbourhood-level structures and mechanisms that enable public engagement and investing in accessible technologies to enhance societal engagement.
- I Building practitioner communities:** To foster knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practice between networks and city governance actors.
- I Investing in climate resilience initiatives:** Such as circular and green economy initiatives, sustainable land use planning, regenerative urban food production and biodiversity conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation in Africa is accelerating, with the number of cities doubling since 1990 to more than 7 600 by 2022 and an urban population increase of approximately 500 million (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development et al. 2022). Most growth occurs in smaller cities with fewer than 500 000 residents, pressuring local governments to address interconnected challenges such as service delivery, hunger, poverty, unemployment, informality, environmental health and climate change (FAO 2018). Subnational governments — those operating below the national government level — face the significant task of ensuring access to safe, nutritious food, which is essential for health and economic well-being (Battersby & Watson 2019). The authority of these governments, however, is often limited, with policy and budget decisions made at the national level, influenced by global frameworks (Emanuel 2024, interview).

Most growth occurs in smaller cities with fewer than 500 000 residents

Urban food systems are often overlooked in research and donor support, which tends to focus on rural issues, leading to solutions that prioritise production over affordability and access (Battersby & Watson 2019). Consequently, many African urban areas lack the governance frameworks to effectively manage food systems, resulting in poor food outcomes and insufficient responses to urbanisation and climate change (Haysom & Battersby 2023). Integrating food system considerations into urban planning can enhance economic growth, healthy outcomes and climate resilience (United Nations 2016).

About this brief

This brief examines local urban food governance, highlighting the urgent need for effective food system management. Through a literature review, case studies and expert interviews, it identifies the challenges, opportunities and best practices for philanthropic investment. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) calls for multi-level, multi-sectoral governance based on agroecological principles that address inequalities and promote sustainable food systems for farmers and consumers, functioning as both a practice and a social movement for systemic change (HLPE 2024: 120).

Key concepts and issues

- I **Governance:** Refers to the relationships between government bodies and civil society determining decision-making, financing and power distribution, which is often centralised at the national level (Smit 2016). Governance appears along a continuum stretching to community and informal governance, occurring in spaces such as informal markets.
- I **Food system:** Includes activities from production to waste management, although urban governments mainly handle distribution, retail and waste (Smit 2016). In African cities, where food is increasingly purchased more than produced (Smit 2016), retail and distribution are critical for food security, as is support for urban food production.
- I **Urban food governance:** Involves infrastructure, regulatory environments and support for production, but it often lacks explicit mandates and hence funding and capacity (Smit 2016; FAO 2018).
- I **Climate change:** Intensifies these challenges, stretching local governments' capacity to build resilience (Tietjen et al. 2023). By 2050, over 105 million Africans may be displaced by climate impacts (Almulhim et al. 2024), threatening food systems and causing social tensions. Effective governance, particularly for the urban poor in climate-vulnerable areas, is essential (FAO 2018; Tietjen et al. 2023).

Key stakeholders in urban food systems and their contributions

- **Local governments:** Are key players but they often face budget and capacity constraints that limit their effectiveness (Battersby & Watson 2019). Within local governments, there is recognition of a clear food mandate in a growing number of departments. These include spatial planning, economic development, education, healthcare and social development.
- **Informal trader or market associations:** Can control access to markets, collect fees and provide services as well as wield political influence as seen in Kumasi, Ghana, where they blocked market fee hikes (Battersby & Watson 2019).
- **Formal private sector:** Includes chambers of commerce and sectoral business forums (Smit 2016), as well as the rapidly expanding supermarket sector (Battersby & Watson 2019).
- **Non-governmental organisations and civil society:** Are focused on a particular aspect of the urban food system such as nutrition, health or hunger (Smit 2016).
- **Community gatekeepers:** Include, for example, local figures who often control vendors' access to markets (Battersby & Watson 2019).
- **Traditional leaders:** Can play a role in land allocation in urban and peri-urban areas, with little accountability to local governments (Smit 2016).
- **Religious associations:** Often play a key role in food support programmes (Smit 2016).

Stakeholders' interventions are often undertaken without a clear view of the broader food system (Smit 2016). Increasingly, local governments are recognising that food producers, academia, food businesses and civil society are essential in developing effective food policies (FAO 2018).



MOTIVATION FOR INVESTMENT INTO URBAN FOOD GOVERNANCE

At a city level, more action on the food system is being undertaken than is commonly recognised. However, these activities are often not articulated as being food-related by local stakeholders and very little overarching coordination exists. Investing into urban food governance yields immediate benefits for food security, economic activity and social cohesion, while facilitating a transition to sustainable systems with long-term advantages (FAO 2018). This kind of investment also supports adaptation and resilience-building in the face of climate change, a critical challenge to urban food security. Small investments into governance and coordination can help to unlock the full potential of much larger investments into other aspects of the food system.

This area presents low-cost opportunities for innovative interventions that generate positive socio-economic and environmental outcomes when undertaken using agroecological principles of strengthened resilience, securing social equity or responsibility and improved resource efficiency.

Philanthropists can choose from various entry points into urban food systems governance including climate change, urban planning, enterprise development, food retail, health, food safety, nutritional security, urban agriculture, infrastructure, waste management, circular economies and social justice. While these entry points need to be city-specific, the long-term goal of governance interventions should be the expansion of the systemic integration between all elements of the food system and between government levels.



CONTEXT

The state of knowledge on this issue

The focus on rural areas and food production has left urban governance actors without a clear mandate to address urban food security (Haysom & Battersby 2023). Despite many African nations enshrining the right to food in their constitutions and allocating substantial budgets to tackle hunger and food system challenges, there are no centralised agencies to coordinate food systems across all levels of government. Urban food governance in Africa is fragmented, with poor coordination and a lack of food policies leading to conflicting mandates (FAO 2018; Battersby & Watson 2019). Critical gaps remain in understanding governance processes, secondary city dynamics, funding, infrastructure adequacy and the impact of supermarket supply chains (Smit 2016).

Converging dynamics affecting the urban governance of food systems

The median age in Africa is 19 years. Africa's youthful and rapidly growing urban population adds a unique dimension to the ways in which governance arrangements are designed and implemented. Converging food-related infrastructure challenges such as the high cost of installing and maintaining essential services such as water, electricity and sanitation further complicate the challenge of effective coordination at the city level and can lead to social unrest and health crises (Haysom & Battersby 2023). External pressures including climate-related migration to urban areas further strain infrastructure and the urban social fabric.

How this theme relates to broader food system transitions in Africa

The need for Africa's food systems to transition towards sustainability and climate resilience is urgent. Rising malnutrition, expanding slums, inequality and ecosystem degradation are compounded by climate change. Countries

including Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Sudan have seen significant loss of peri-urban agricultural land due to unplanned urbanisation (Ngcamu 2022). Shifting urban food system governance towards alignment with agroecological principles could benefit rural land use, supporting broader national and regional agroecological transitions.

The need for urban governance to act at multiple scales

Effective urban governance requires collaboration among stakeholders and coordination of mandates to address interconnected challenges (Haysom & Battersby 2023). This includes enabling by-laws, infrastructure and departmental integration at the city level, with food governance aligned to agroecology to strengthen resilience (FAO 2018). Improved coordination with national governments on policy and budgets is essential (FAO 2018).

Cross-cutting issues

- **Youth dividend:** With Africa's median age at 19, urban food systems must support youth development and health amid rising consumption of ultra-processed foods linked to non-communicable diseases (Haysom & Battersby 2023; Haysom 2024).
- **Gender inclusivity:** Women, who are key in food purchasing and informal vending, often remain under-represented in governance systems (Haysom & Battersby 2023).
- **Local and indigenous knowledge:** Marginalised community-level knowledge could drive change, particularly in urban settings with diverse food cultures.
- **Waste management:** Urban food waste contributes to pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, leading to a loss of valuable resources.
- **Dynamic power structures:** Governance is shaped by both formal and informal actors such as market cartels and middlepersons who influence food prices

and access. Addressing excessive control while enhancing food safety and reducing waste requires inclusive governance (Opiyo & Ogindo 2018).

- I **High levels of informality:** Local governments need flexible regulations to manage the informal economy and foster inclusive engagement without burdening micro-food producers (interviews: Brian 2024; Emanuel 2024; Pauw 2024; Tângari 2024; van Veenhuizen 2024).

Regional differences in urban food governance in Africa

Africa's diversity encompasses various languages, cultures and food systems. However, colonial legacies have created shared challenges including racialised control over national food systems, reduced social spending due to structural adjustment policies (Haysom & Battersby 2023) and the global food system's impact on local contexts. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of urban–rural dynamics and a territorial or city-region perspective to highlight the interconnectedness of food production and related rural issues impacting urban food security, availability and safety (interviews: Pauw 2024; van Veenhuizen 2024).

Key levers for food system transition through urban governance

- I **Creating space for multi-stakeholder dialogue:** Across various levels and scales (political, administrative and geographical) to collaboratively determine priority actions (Urban Food Systems Coalition 2022). The FAO and ICLEI (2021) note that developing coherent, integrated food policies and inviting multi-stakeholder engagement is a critical pathway to transforming urban food systems.
- I **Pairing dialogue with concrete actions:** Collaborative efforts, co-developed with stakeholders and based on research, enhance local governance through cross-sectoral synergies (Emanuel 2024, interview). Initiatives like market infrastructure investments require engagement across multiple government departments (Marocchino 2024, interview). Strengthening MSPs for practical

action ensures long-term participation and impact (Metelerkamp et al. 2021).

- I **Facilitating the exchange of knowledge and lived experience among key stakeholders:** As well as enabling the sharing of data in accessible and appropriate formats. The real-time tracking of food security trends, market dynamics and environmental impacts can support data-driven decision-making. Communication to broader public stakeholders is critical to ensure long-lasting effects, as is the monitoring and evaluation of the intervention to enable iterative improvements (van Veenhuizen 2024, interview).
- I **Ongoing and deliberate inclusion of all stakeholders:** This requires trans-governmental integration and direct engagement with those affected by the challenges and whose insights should shape intervention design (Pauw 2024, interview). Identifying champions who are committed and skilled in relationship-building and conflict mediation is crucial (Emanuel 2024, interview) but their role should diminish as processes mature (Tângari 2024, interview).
- I **Supporting urban governments in developing food system strategies that promote cross-departmental engagement:** As well as incentivising stakeholder participation, such as subsidies for production, retail and waste recycling (Tângari 2024, interview). Strengthening inter-city and city-region ties by involving rural producers to ensure stable, nutritious food supplies to urban areas (Marocchino 2024, interview). Many local governments have good policies but lack the funds or capacity to implement them. Mechanisms like public procurement from urban producers can unite food system actors and drive transformation (Tângari 2024, interview). Waste-to-nutrition programmes, like food recovery and composting, can foster circular economies and reduce food waste.
- I **Focusing on institutionalisation:** Funded interventions should prioritise institutionalisation from the outset, aiming for local government ownership of initiatives like MSPs and incorporating resource needs into their budgets (Tângari 2024, interview). This requires building local governance capacity to adopt and implement a food systems governance approach as well as support for governance actors to articulate their strategies to unlock funding and political buy-in (Tângari 2024, interview).

I Establishing financing mechanisms for urban food solutions: Increasing the role for local governments in the food system requires commensurate resourcing and the devolution of authority and budget from national governments. Similarly, investing in market

systems and infrastructure (cold storage, processing hubs and decentralised food markets and distribution networks) would improve both affordability and accessibility to food.



HURDLES TO TRANSITION

- I **Competing governmental mandates:** Conflicting interests and mandates hinder collaboration on urban food security (Battersby & Watson 2019). This applies between national and subnational governments and even between subnational government departments. Mandate-mapping can help local governments see how their responsibilities intersect with food systems, which can encourage engagement (Emanuel 2024, interview).
- I **A diversity of stakeholders:** Many stakeholders engage with urban food systems, often through informal channels, making consensus on priorities challenging, especially in the absence of regulatory frameworks (Brian 2024, interview).
- I **Lack of inclusivity:** Governance often excludes key stakeholders such as informal vendors and the urban poor as well as powerful players like the private sector and global organisations (Haysom & Battersby 2023; van Veenhuizen 2024, interview). Governance structures must mediate competing needs, often side-lining marginalised groups that lack the power to voice their concerns (Marocchino 2024, interview).
- I **Disparities in capacity and resources:** Many local governments lack the expertise, funding and data needed for effective policies (Emanuel 2024, interview; HLPE 2024). Capacity-building is critical to empower city leaders and strengthen food systems (interviews: Pauw 2024; Tângari 2024; van Veenhuizen 2024).
- I **Inadequate integration hampers food governance:** Achieving vertical alignment between local, provincial and national levels is time-consuming, and national decisions may not address local needs (Emanuel 2024, interview). Horizontal integration within local governments is crucial due to the intersection of food systems with various departmental responsibilities (interviews: Pauw 2024; van Veenhuizen 2024). Community governance may need distinct structures based on specific issues (van Veenhuizen 2024, interview).

The state of transition funding

Donor funds for cities primarily target infrastructure and services related to energy and water, often neglecting food systems (Marocchino 2024, interview). While there are more significant funds for job creation, climate action and groups such as women and the youth (Marocchino 2024, interview), funding is also being directed towards establishing food policy councils (FPCs) and researching urban food security in Africa. A few examples are the Lusaka Food Policy Council in Zambia and the European Commission-funded AfriFOODlinks project (EUR 11.8 million), which aims to improve food security and urban sustainability across more than 15 cities in Africa and Europe. However, initiatives mostly have short intervention timelines that are insufficient for achieving sustainable impact (Tângari 2024, interview). More funding is needed for capacity-building and direct support for local governance actors to meet their goals (Marocchino 2024, interview). Local non-governmental organisations can facilitate this capacity-building, thereby fostering closer ties among stakeholders (Marocchino 2024, interview). Without this support, local governance actors will struggle to adopt and implement a sustainable food systems approach (Brian 2024, interview).

Potential for additionality from philanthropic contribution

While limited resources are allocated to food governance at all government levels, significant portions of government budgets are spent on food-related activities. In South Africa, about 10% of the national budget in 2022 was dedicated to ensuring the right to food (Metelerkamp 2024). Few governments recognise this cumulative spending. Philanthropic investments into the enhanced coordination of this expenditure should focus on:

- I Enhancing the impact of existing funding; and
- I Supporting the medium-term transition to state funding of food governance functions by demonstrating the value of these comparatively small investments in better coordination of fragmented food spending.

To what extent and in what ways might current philanthropic funding strategies and mechanisms be exacerbating problematic trends?

Private and philanthropic funding often aims to improve food access for marginalised communities but tends to overlook the systemic causes of food insecurity. In the short term, project-focused interventions can depoliticise food security; by often addressing immediate needs without

challenging the structural issues, they can diminish the focus on larger systemic drivers and reinforce power imbalances (HLPE 2024). Even participatory funding approaches are constrained by short project cycles, limiting their potential for systemic change.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE TRANSITIONS

- I **Effectively supporting cities on this path:** Should involve partnerships with regional actors, like the FAO, and investments in MSPs and resources to implement food councils and strategies in resource-limited administrations. Interventions should focus on practical, scalable experiments and governance systems, designed for iterative improvement (interviews: Emanuel 2024; Pauw 2024). Supporting governance actors with the skills to develop and implement food system strategies is also crucial (Marocchino 2024, interview).
- I **Investing in MSPs such as FPCs:** Fosters collaboration (Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS) & ACRA 2024). These kinds of investment also amplify marginalised voices (Haysom & Battersby 2023), though their long-term effectiveness is limited by funding and capacity issues. To ensure sustainability, funding FPC secretariats (Pauw 2024, interview) and establishing food desks in local governments is vital (Opiyo 2024, interview).
- I **Improving policy, priorities and budget integration:** Is key to enabling local governments to determine their own priorities and access resources. This process must be institutionalised to build local capacity (Emanuel 2024, interview).
- I **Supporting additional, particularly intermediary, cities with food councils and strategies:** Allows for more visible impact as their stakeholder relations are less complex and thus provide more room for innovation (Pauw 2024, interview).
- I **Strengthening civil society voices, public participation mechanisms and localised food governance structures:** Can enhance public participation and governance impact (van Veenhuizen 2024, interview).
- I **Strengthening a global practitioner community and facilitating South–South collaboration through regular exchanges:** Will boost local capacity, support knowledge exchange and generate evidence for better decision-making (Emanuel 2024, interview).

Actionable funding opportunities

1. **South–South learning lab on urban food governance:** The Brazilian Lab on Urban Food Policies (also known as LUPPA) and ICLEI Africa are developing a project to connect major city networks focused on food governance in Latin America and Africa. Phase 1 includes online master classes, in-person summer schools and practical assignments to help African cities learn from Latin America’s experiences while crafting their city food strategies over 12 months. Phase 2 will assist cities in fundraising for strategy implementation.

Funding need: US\$2 million over two years.

For more information on the initiatives: [Multi-stakeholder Food Systems Dialogues in the Global South \(Africa and Latin America\)](#) and [The Successful 2nd Edition of the Brazilian Lab on Urban Food Policies](#).

2. **Establish a small-grant facility to catalyse governance actions:** Collaborate with consortiums such as Rikolto’s Good Food for Cities network or AfriFOODlinks to create a small-grant facility (US\$5 000–25,000) for African MSPs. This fund would cover:
 - I Daily operational expenses for convening and exchange;
 - I Costs for early-stage actions identified by MSP members to build MSP legitimacy and political capital; and
 - I Detailed monitoring and evaluation of governance activities.

In addition, the fund could provide larger grants to resource-constrained cities seeking a dedicated coordinator for their food desk, using a matching model where the fund covers 50% of the coordinator’s salary.

Funding need: US\$4 million over four years.

For more information on the initiatives: [Rikolto Good Food for Cities](#) and [AfriFOODlinks](#).

3. **Invest into the creation of African centres of excellence:** Support the emergence of African centres of excellence in food governance and policy experimentation by providing funding for five cities with established food policies and governance structures to pursue one–two innovative activities beyond their current mandates. Funding can be directed to the cities or through agencies like Rikolto, ACRA, ICLEI or HIVOS.

Funding need: US\$5 million over three years.

4. **Invest into the expansion of the emerging continental network working on urban food issues:** AfriFOODlinks, a 28-partner consortium launched in December 2022 and funded by the European Commission, is the first Horizon Europe project on food in Africa that is led by an African

organisation. From 2022 to 2026, AfriFOODlinks will invest EUR-11.8 million into 15 African cities and five European cities to:

- Promote sustainable and healthy diets;
- Transform urban food environments through socio-technical experiments;
- Foster inclusive multi-actor governance for stakeholder empowerment; and
- Support innovative women- and youth-led agri-food businesses for local value addition.

This consortium lays the groundwork for a larger continental investment in urban food systems, with the potential to expand insights from these cities to a broader network.

Funding need: US\$30 million over five years.

For more information on the initiative: [AfriFOODlinks](#).



Principles and mechanisms for donor funding

- A core focus on inclusive relationship-building between stakeholders through support for some form of MSP that includes local governance actors;
- Emphasising ongoing capacity-building for local governments;
- Consideration of power dynamics that may exist between stakeholders, including between government levels and departments, and as they relate to vulnerable or marginalised groups;
- Being informed about national and local contexts to avoid unintended consequences such as deepening a related crisis;
- Setting up interventions for success and sustainability; and
- Working with local governments and not outside these structures – without institutionalism, interventions are likely to fail.

Mechanisms for funding include funding the municipality and/or civil society actors already working in this space to initiate multilateral stakeholder dialogues or to enhance their existing work.



CASE STUDIES

Uganda: The Mbale Good Food Council and Good Food Parliament

Uganda's rapid urbanisation, particularly in Kampala and Mbale, is reshaping food systems, with the urban population expected to rise from 25% to 50% by 2040. The Good Food Council in Mbale employs a three-tier strategy focussed on sustainable production, inclusive markets and a supportive environment, which promotes regenerative farming and multi-stakeholder collaboration to address climate change, inequality and food insecurity (Food Rights Alliance et al.

2024). The council engages stakeholders, gathers data and makes recommendations adopted by the Good Food Parliament, which includes local governance members (Brian 2024, interview). Achievements include improved market hygiene and safety, and participatory governance has enabled local actors to co-create solutions. However, city-level food safety by-laws remain unformalised.

Uganda: The Fort Portal Food Change Lab

The Food Change Lab in Fort Portal, Uganda addresses malnutrition and dietary diversity issues. Although the region exports food, it suffers from high malnutrition rates and low levels of dietary diversity. Street vendors face regulatory barriers, particularly around access to clean water for food safety. Key actions include advocacy for policy change, leading to amendments in food production laws, stakeholder mobilisation and participatory research.

Successes include improved food safety, better public perception of street vendors and policy changes. The lab shows how inclusive governance and community-driven solutions can enhance food security and dietary diversity in urban areas. Challenges remain, however, such as the absence of national policy change and limited private-sector involvement (Pittore & Debons 2023).



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the AfriFOODlinks project, which has played a key role in advancing collaborative work on urban food systems across Africa which informed this brief. They would also like to thank Gareth Haysom at the Africa Centre for Cities at UCT for his input and review. Special thanks to all contributing experts as well as ICLEI Africa for leading the development of this brief and for their continued commitment to strengthening local government action on sustainable and resilient food systems.

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Brian L (2024) Interviewed by Stefanie Swanepoel for *Urban Food Governance at the Sub-National Scale*, African Food Systems Transformation Collective Subnational brief

Emanuel B (2024) Interviewed by Stefanie Swanepoel and Sara Nakalila for *Urban Food Governance at the Sub-National Scale*, African Food Systems Transformation Collective Subnational brief

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This network of researchers and food systems development experts collaborates to inform philanthropies, governments and development finance organisations on funding strategies to promote transitions to sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems across Africa.

To ensure a high standard of evidence-informed recommendations, briefs in this series were rigorously reviewed by peers within the AFSTC, including fellow researchers and members of the advisory committee.

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