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Microbial Solutions for Resilient Dryland Agroecosystems and their Legal Implications

Nwakoby, I. P.[1*], Iheukwumere, I. H.[2*], Iheukwumere, C. M.[3], Nwakoby, N. E.[2], Idigo, M. A.[4] and Ike, V. E.[5]

[1]Department of Private and Public Law, Faculty of Law, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria.
[2]Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria.
[3]Department of Applied Microbiology & Brewing, Faculty of Biosciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria.
[4]Department of Biological Sciences, Faculty of Natural Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State, Nigeria.
[5]Department of Microbiology, University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Umuagwo, Imo State, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author e-mail address: ip.nwakoby@coou.edu.ng / ik.iheukwumere@coou.edu.ng

Abstract

Covering over 40% of the Earth's land surface and supporting nearly 2.5 billion people, dryland agroecosystems are increasingly threatened by climate change-induced desertification, salinity, and water scarcity. Conventional agriculture often worsens this degradation, creating an urgent need for sustainable solutions. This review argues that microbial biotechnology, particularly the application of tailored microbial consortia, offers a transformative approach to enhance dryland resilience and productivity. We examine the mechanisms by which beneficial microbes—such as arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) and plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR)—alleviate abiotic stress through improved nutrient uptake, phytohormone production, and soil stabilization. Field studies demonstrate the potential of these inoculants to boost crop yields and soil health under drought and salinity. However, translating this scientific promise into widespread practice faces major legal and regulatory hurdles. Existing frameworks, often modeled on chemical agents, are ill-suited for living products. Challenges include ambiguous definitions, costly registration processes, intellectual property disputes, and biosafety concerns regarding non-native species. This paper critically analyzes these barriers and discusses the need for novel regulatory pathways, standardized testing, and international policy harmonization. We conclude that unlocking the full potential of microbial technologies for dryland agroecosystems requires a synergistic approach, integrating robust scientific innovation with adaptive, risk-proportionate legal governance.

Keywords: Dryland Agriculture, Climate Resilience, Microbial Inoculants, Plant Growth-Promoting Rhizobacteria (PGPR), Arbuscular Mycorrhizal Fungi (AMF), Biostimulants, Regulatory Frameworks, Intellectual Property Rights, Biosafety, Sustainable Land Management.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Global Significance and Defining Challenges

Drylands, characterized by low and highly variable rainfall, high evaporation rates, and generally fragile soils, are home to some of the world's most vulnerable populations (UNCCD, 2017). These regions are not marginal; they are central to global food production, supporting a significant portion of the world's cereal and livestock production. However, climate change is intensifying the inherent constraints of these ecosystems. Increased temperatures, more frequent and severe droughts, and soil salinization due to inefficient irrigation practices are accelerating land degradation and desertification, posing a direct threat to food security and socio-economic stability (IPCC, 2019). The resilience of these systems—their capacity to withstand shocks and maintain function—is being severely tested.

1.2. The Limits of Conventional Agriculture

For decades, the response to food insecurity in drylands has often involved the promotion of high-yielding crop varieties dependent on extensive irrigation, synthetic fertilizers, and chemical pesticides. While sometimes boosting short-term productivity, this approach has frequently proven unsustainable. Over-exploitation of scarce water resources has led to aquifer depletion, while excessive fertilizer use can lead to soil acidification and groundwater pollution. Furthermore, the high cost of these inputs places them out of reach for many smallholder farmers who dominate dryland agriculture, exacerbating rural poverty (Tilman *et al*., 2011). There is a clear and pressing need for alternative strategies that work with ecological processes rather than against them.

1.3. The Paradigm of Microbial Solutions

Soil microorganisms are the unseen engineers of ecosystem functioning. In dryland soils, a diverse microbial community is essential for nutrient cycling, organic matter decomposition, and the formation of stable soil aggregates that resist erosion (Nannipieri *et al*., 2003; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025a; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025b). The emerging field of microbial biotechnology seeks to harness and augment this natural capacity. By applying specific, beneficial microorganisms—known as microbial inoculants or biofertilizers—it is possible to directly enhance the stress tolerance of crops and improve the health of the soil itself. This approach moves away from supplying resources (water, nutrients) to the plant, and towards enabling the plant-soil system to more efficiently capture and utilize those scarce resources. This review argues that this paradigm shift is not merely a scientific innovation but a necessity for creating climate-resilient agriculture in the world's drylands.

The promise of microbial solutions is immense, but its realization is not straightforward. The scientific understanding of microbial ecology in drylands is still evolving, and the transition from controlled laboratory experiments to consistent field performance remains a challenge. Moreover, and perhaps more critically, the development and deployment of these living technologies are constrained by a legal and regulatory framework designed for chemicals, not biology. This review will first delve into the science behind microbial resilience, examining the specific mechanisms by which microorganisms confer benefits. It will then present evidence from real-world applications. The second half of the paper will undertake a detailed analysis of the legal implications, identifying the gaps and hurdles in current regulatory systems and proposing pathways for a more adaptive and enabling governance framework.

2. MICROBIAL MECHANISMS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

The resilience conferred by microorganisms is a result of a multitude of direct and indirect mechanisms that influence both the plant and the soil environment. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for selecting and designing effective microbial consortia.

2.1. Mitigating Drought Stress

Drought stress induces a complex physiological response in plants, including osmotic stress, oxidative damage, and inhibited growth. Microorganisms counter these effects through:

Osmotic Adjustment: PGPR such as *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Bacillus* spp. can produce compatible solutes (e.g., proline, glycine betaine) that help maintain cell turgor under water deficit, a benefit that can be extended to the host plant (Vurukonda *et al.,* 2016; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025c; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025d).

Phytohormone Modulation: Many PGPR are prolific producers of phytohormones like auxins (e.g., IAA), which stimulate root growth, leading to a larger root system capable of exploring a greater soil volume for water. Others produce cytokinins or inhibit the production of the stress hormone ethylene by synthesizing ACC deaminase, which cleaves the ethylene precursor ACC, thereby reducing stress-induced senescence (Glick, 2014).

Enhanced Water Uptake: Arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF) extend their hyphal networks far beyond the root zone, effectively acting as an extension of the root system. These hyphae can access water from micro-pores in the soil that are unavailable to roots, significantly improving the plant's water status under drought (Augé, 2001).

2.2. Alleviating Salinity Stress

Soil salinity causes ionic imbalance, osmotic stress, and specific ion toxicity (e.g., Na^+ and Cl^-). Microbial mitigation strategies include:

Ion Homeostasis: Certain bacteria and fungi can sequester sodium ions (Na^+) or enhance the expression of plant genes involved in exporting Na^+ from cells or compartmentalizing it in vacuoles. This reduces ionic toxicity in the cytoplasm (Etesami and Beattie, 2018; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025e; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025f).

Production of Exopolysaccharides (EPS): Bacterial EPS form a protective biofilm around roots, which can bind Na^+ ions, reducing their uptake by the plant and improving the soil structure around the rhizosphere (Qurashi & Sabri, 2012; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025g; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025h).

Antioxidant Defense: Salinity stress induces oxidative damage. Microbes can enhance the activity of antioxidant enzymes in plants, such as superoxide dismutase (SOD) and peroxidase (POD), scavenging reactive oxygen species (ROS) and protecting cellular integrity.

2.3. Enhancing Nutrient Acquisition in Nutrient-Poor Soils

Dryland soils are often characterized by low fertility, particularly deficiencies in nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P).

Biological Nitrogen Fixation (BNF): Rhizobia bacteria form symbiotic relationships with leguminous plants, converting atmospheric Nitrogen into plant-usable ammonia. Non-symbiotic, free-living diazotrophs (e.g., *Azotobacter, Azospirillum*) also fix N and can associate with non-legumes, providing a significant source of N in low-input systems (Bhattacharjee *et al.,* 2008; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025i; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025j).

Phosphorus Solubilization: A large proportion of soil P is fixed in forms unavailable to plants. Microbes, particularly fungi like *Aspergillus* and *Penicillium* and bacteria like *Pseudomonas*, secrete organic acids and phosphatases that solubilize inorganic and organic P, respectively, making it accessible for plant uptake (Alori *et al*., 2017; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025k; Iheukwumere *et al*., 2025l).

Mycorrhizal Nutrient Transport: AMF are particularly effective in acquiring immobile nutrients like P, Zn, and Cu. Their extensive hyphal network acts as a nutrient foraging system, absorbing nutrients and transferring them directly to the plant root in exchange for carbohydrates.

2.4. Improving Soil Health and Structure

Beyond direct plant benefits, microbes are fundamental to building healthy, resilient soils.

Aggregate Stability: Microbial hyphae (especially from fungi) and secretions like EPS and glomalin (a glycoprotein produced by AMF) act as binding agents for soil particles, forming water-stable aggregates. This improves soil porosity, water infiltration, and water-holding capacity, while reducing erosion (Rillig and Mummey, 2006).

Carbon Sequestration: By promoting plant growth and contributing microbial biomass, these inoculants increase the input of organic carbon into the soil. Stable soil aggregates protect this carbon from rapid decomposition, contributing to long-term carbon sequestration—a critical co-benefit for climate change mitigation (Jansson and Hofmockel, 2020).

The synergistic interaction of these mechanisms underscores that microbial inoculants are not simple "silver bullets" but function as ecological catalysts, enhancing the inherent resilience of the entire plant-soil system.

3. CASE STUDIES AND EFFICACY OF MICROBIAL APPLICATIONS

The theoretical benefits of microbial inoculants are increasingly supported by empirical evidence from diverse dryland regions. However, the results also highlight the context-dependency of their success.

3.1. Field Applications in Cereal Cropping Systems

Cereals like wheat, maize, and millet are staples in dryland agriculture. Studies have shown promising results:

Wheat in Arid Regions: A field study in Egypt demonstrated that inoculation of wheat with a consortium of PGPR (*Bacillus megaterium*, *Azospirillum brasilense*) and AMF led to a 20-30% increase in grain yield under reduced irrigation regimes compared to uninoculated controls. The inoculated plants exhibited higher relative water content and chlorophyll levels (Abd_Allah *et al*., 2018; Ekechukwu *et al*., 2025a; Ekechukwu *et al*., 2025b).

Pearl Millet in Semi-Arid India: Research on pearl millet, a key crop for arid zones, showed that co-inoculation with Azospirillum and AMF significantly improved plant biomass, grain yield, and P uptake under rain-fed conditions. This was attributed to better root development and enhanced nutrient acquisition (Bhattacharjee *et al*., 2008; Ekechukwu *et al*., 2025c; Dim *et al.,* 2025a).

3.2. Applications in Horticulture and Agroforestry

High-value crops and trees are also targets for microbial enhancement.

Olive Trees in Mediterranean Drylands: The inoculation of young olive trees with native AMF has been shown to improve their establishment and survival under water stress. The mycorrhizal trees had higher growth rates, leaf water potential, and resistance to root pathogens (Porras-Soriano *et al*., 2009).

Tomato Production under Salinity Stress: In saline-affected greenhouses, inoculation of tomato with ACC deaminase-producing bacteria (*Pseudomonas putida*) mitigated the negative effects of salinity on fruit yield and quality. The bacterial treatment reduced ethylene-induced stress and improved ion balance (Mayak *et al.,* 2004; Dim *et al*., 2025b; Dim *et al*., 2025c).

3.3. Challenges in Field Efficacy and Consistency

Despite these successes, the path to widespread adoption is not smooth. A significant challenge is the inconsistency of results across different locations, seasons, and soil types. This variability can be attributed to:

Competition with Indigenous Microbiota: The introduced microbial strains must compete with the established, and often well-adapted, native soil microbial community (Ike *et al*., 2025a; Ike *et al*., 2025b; Ike *et al*., 2025c).

Environmental Conditions: Soil pH, temperature, moisture, and organic matter content can profoundly influence the survival and activity of the inoculant.

Inoculant Formulation and Delivery: The carrier material used in the inoculant product, its shelf life, and the method of application (seed coating, soil drench) are critical determinants of success.

These challenges highlight that microbial inoculants are not standalone products but management components within a broader agroecological context. Their success depends on integrating them with other sustainable practices, such as conservation tillage and organic amendments (Ike *et al*., 2025d; Ike *et al*., 2025e; Ugwu *et al*., 2025a).

4. THE LEGAL AND REGULATORY LANDSCAPE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The promising science of microbial solutions collides with a legal framework that is largely archaic and ill-suited for regulating living organisms. The current systems, primarily designed for chemical pesticides and fertilizers, create significant barriers to innovation and deployment.

4.1. The Regulatory Quagmire: Defining Microbial Products

A fundamental problem is the ambiguous legal categorization of microbial products. They can be classified as:

Biofertilizers: If their primary claimed effect is to enhance nutrient availability.

Biostimulants: If they are claimed to enhance nutrition efficiency, abiotic stress tolerance, or crop quality traits.

Biocontrol Agents: If they are intended to protect plants from pests and diseases.

This ambiguity leads to regulatory confusion, as each category may fall under different legislative acts (e.g., Fertilizer Acts, Pesticide Acts) with divergent data requirements and responsible authorities. The European Union's recent Fertilising Products Regulation (FPR) 2019/1009, which includes a specific category for microbial biostimulants, is a step forward, but its implementation remains complex (EU, 2019).

4.2. Registration and Approval Processes: A Barrier to Innovation?

The registration process for a new microbial product is often lengthy, costly, and modeled on chemical paradigms. Requirements for toxicological and ecotoxicological data (e.g., LD50 tests on rats) are frequently inappropriate for assessing the risks of living microbes, which are often non-pathogenic and soil-borne (Montgomery, 2017; Ugwu *et al*., 2025b; Ekesiobi *et al*., 2025). The high cost of compliance disproportionately disadvantages small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and public sector researchers, stifling innovation and limiting the diversity of products available to farmers.

4.3. Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS)

The commercial development of microbial products hinges on IPR protection. However, patenting biological material is fraught with complexity.

Patentability: To be patented, a microbial strain must be novel, inventive, and industrially applicable. Isolating a naturally occurring strain from the environment may satisfy novelty if it is purified and characterized, but the "inventive step" can be a high bar. Genetic engineering can strengthen a patent claim but raises additional biosafety and public acceptance issues (Amadi *et al*., 2017; Nwike *et al*., 2017).

Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS): The Nagoya Protocol under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) regulates access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from their utilization (CBD, 2011). If a company isolates a potent strain from a farmer's field in a developing country, who owns it? The protocol establishes requirements for Prior Informed Consent (PIC) and Mutually Agreed Terms (MAT), but its implementation is challenging, particularly for microbial resources that are easily transported and difficult to trace to their origin.

4.4. Biosafety and Environmental Risk Assessment (ERA)

The deliberate release of microorganisms into the environment warrants a careful, science-based risk assessment. Key concerns include:

Pathogenicity: Could the inoculant, or its genetic material, pose a risk to human, animal, or plant health?

Persistence and Invasiveness: Will the introduced strain persist and spread beyond the application site, potentially disrupting native microbial communities and ecosystem functions?

Horizontal Gene Transfer: Could genes from the inoculant (e.g., antibiotic resistance genes) be transferred to indigenous microorganisms?

Current ERA frameworks are often criticized for being either too lax, failing to address ecological complexities, or too precautionary, effectively blocking benign products. There is a need for tiered, case-by-case assessments that are proportionate to the perceived risk (e.g., a strain isolated from a European soil and applied in Europe poses a different risk profile than an exotic strain).

4.5. Liability and Post-Market Monitoring

What happens if a microbial product fails to deliver promised results or, in a worst-case scenario, causes harm? Liability regimes are underdeveloped.

Product Liability: If an inoculant is sold as a "fertilizer" but fails to improve yield, can the farmer sue for financial loss? The legal classification will determine the applicable liability rules.

Environmental Damage: If a non-native microbial strain becomes invasive and alters soil ecology, who is liable for the remediation costs? The "polluter pays" principle may apply, but proving causation in a complex ecosystem is immensely difficult.

The lack of mandatory post-market monitoring for most registered products means that long-term ecological effects remain largely unknown, creating a potential for future liabilities and eroding public trust.

5. TOWARDS AN ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

To harness the benefits of microbial technologies while managing risks, a fundamental evolution in governance is required. The goal should be to create a regulatory environment that is both safe and enabling.

5.1. Proposals for Risk-Proportionate Regulation

A one-size-fits-all approach is inefficient. A tiered or categorical regulatory system is needed:

Low-Risk Category: Strains that are well-characterized, non-pathogenic, and native to the region of application could undergo a simplified, fast-track registration process with reduced data requirements. This would apply to many common PGPR and AMF species.

Higher-Risk Category: Genetically modified microorganisms (GMMs), or strains with known pathogenic relatives, would require a more rigorous, full-risk assessment. This approach would reduce the regulatory burden for most products while maintaining high safety standards for those that genuinely warrant scrutiny (McIntyre *et al*., 2022).

5.2. Harmonizing International Standards

The global nature of agriculture and trade calls for international harmonization of regulations. Inconsistent requirements between countries create major obstacles for companies wishing to market products internationally. Organizations like the FAO and OECD could facilitate the development of international guidelines for the registration and risk assessment of microbial inoculants, promoting data reciprocity and reducing redundant testing.

5.3. The Role of Public-Private Partnerships and Farmer Education

Governments and international agencies have a crucial role to play beyond regulation.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): PPPs can fund pre-competitive research to address fundamental challenges, such as developing better carrier formulations or understanding microbial ecology in soils. They can also support the creation of public strain collections and validation platforms to help SMEs demonstrate product efficacy.

Farmer Education and Labeling: Clear, honest labeling is essential. Farmers need to understand that microbial products are not magic potions; their success depends on proper storage, application, and integration into good agronomic practices. Extension services must be equipped to educate farmers on the realistic expectations and correct use of these biological tools. An adaptive governance framework recognizes that regulation is not just about control, but about fostering responsible innovation. It requires ongoing dialogue between scientists, regulators, industry, and farmers to iteratively refine policies based on new scientific evidence and practical experience.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The escalating environmental stresses facing dryland agroecosystems demand a transformative approach to agriculture. Microbial solutions offer a powerful, biologically grounded pathway to enhance crop resilience, improve soil health, and contribute to sustainable intensification. The scientific evidence demonstrates that by leveraging the multifaceted abilities of beneficial microorganisms, we can help plants better tolerate drought and salinity, access scarce nutrients, and build more stable soils. This represents a move towards a more holistic, ecologically intelligent form of agriculture.

However, the promise of this microbial revolution will remain largely unfulfilled if it is constrained by an outdated and inflexible legal system. The current regulatory paradigms, designed for chemicals, are ill-equipped to handle the unique properties of living products. The challenges of definition, costly registration, IPR disputes, biosafety concerns, and liability issues create significant barriers to market entry and farmer access.

Therefore, the path forward requires a dual commitment: first, to continued scientific research to improve the consistency, efficacy, and understanding of microbial applications in diverse field conditions; and second, to a parallel effort in legal and regulatory innovation. This entails developing risk-proportionate, tiered regulatory pathways, harmonizing international standards, and strengthening mechanisms for benefit-sharing and post-market monitoring.

The future of dryland agriculture depends on our ability to foster synergy between scientific discovery and adaptive governance. By creating a legal environment that encourages responsible innovation while safeguarding human and ecosystem health, we can unlock the immense potential of microbial technologies to build truly resilient agroecosystems capable of supporting future generations in the face of climate change.

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