

# Responses of Soybean (*Glycine Max* (L.) Merrill) to Inoculation with *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* According to Soil Type in Southeastern DR Congo

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sb.2025.v11i11.001>

| Received: 08.10.2025 | Accepted: 03.11.2025 | Published: 16.12.2025

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## Abstract

This study evaluates the impact of soybean inoculation with *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* on different soil types (Acric Ferralsol, Xanthic Ferralsol, Eutric Cambisol) in the Lubumbashi region, in southeastern DR Congo, where yields are low due to soil degradation and limited use of inputs. The main objective was to identify the optimal combinations between *Bradyrhizobium* strains, soybean varieties, and soil types in order to improve soybean productivity and contribute to the regeneration of degraded tropical soils. A field trial was conducted using a split-plot design. Three strains of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* and an uninoculated control were applied to five soybean varieties on three different soil types. The seeds were inoculated before sowing. Agronomic data (emergence, growth, nodulation, yield) and soil physicochemical properties were collected and analyzed by ANOVA to evaluate the effects of different factors and their interactions. The results showed a strong interaction between soil type, *Bradyrhizobium* strain, and soybean variety. The Ferralsols, more degraded, responded better to inoculation than the eutric Cambisol, which is more fertile. Strains S1 (USDA 110) and S3 (USDA 142) proved to be the most effective in improving nodulation and vegetative growth. Surprisingly, the highest yields were observed in the acric Ferralsols, despite lower nodulation, suggesting a better allocation of resources toward seed production. Inoculation also had a positive effect on pH and cation availability in Ferralsols. The study confirms that the effectiveness of soybean inoculation strongly depends on local soil conditions. An agroecological approach, adapting the choice of *Bradyrhizobium* strains to the soil type, is essential for sustainably improving soybean productivity and the fertility of tropical soils.

**Keywords:** *Glycine max* (L.) Merrill, *Bradyrhizobium japonicum*, Ferralsols, Cambisol, inoculation, yield.

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## INTRODUCTION

Soybeans (*Glycine max* (L.) Merrill) are a strategic crop worldwide due to their high protein content and their diverse uses in human and animal nutrition. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), production has increased

significantly, rising from approximately 20,000 ha in the 1970s to over 1,500,000 ha in 2016 (Khojely et al., 2018). However, this expansion of acreage has not been accompanied by a comparable improvement in yields, which remain low, at around 1.1 t·ha<sup>-1</sup> compared to a

**Citation:** Ben Tshibuyi Kasu-Bandi, Cedric Ntemunyi Ntata, Antoine Kanyenga Lubobo, Hugue Ilunga Tabu, Robert Prince Mukobo Mundende, Laurent Kidinda Kidinda, Emery Kasongo Lenge (2025). Responses of Soybean (*Glycine Max* (L.) Merrill) to Inoculation with *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* According to Soil Type in Southeastern DR Congo. *Sch Bull*, 11(11): 189-204.

world average of  $2.4 \text{ t} \cdot \text{ha}^{-1}$  (Khojely *et al.*, 2018). This situation results in particular from the use of low-performing varieties, soil degradation and limited adoption of fertilizers and rhizobial inoculants (Woomer *et al.*, 2012).

Tropical soils in Africa are characterized by low fertility, exacerbated by erosion, acidity, low cation exchange capacity, and nutrient depletion (Bado, 2002 ; Raimi *et al.*, 2017 ; Hassan, 2018 ; Jaiswal *et al.*, 2021). In a context of rising mineral input costs and environmental challenges, rhizobial symbioses appear as a sustainable alternative (VERICELE *et al.*, 2010). Among them, the association between soybeans and *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* is particularly effective for biological nitrogen fixation, promoting growth, soybean productivity and soil enrichment (Smith *et al.*, 1987; Gopalakrishnan *et al.*, 2015; Kasu-Bandi *et al.*, 2021). These mechanisms prove essential in regions such as Haut-Katanga, where Ferralsols and Cambisols often exhibit low levels of fertility.

However, the response of soybeans to inoculation varies greatly depending on the bacterial strain, variety, and soil properties (Mukalay, 2016 ; Tshibuyi *et al.*, 2019 ; Kyei-Boahen *et al.*, 2023). The acidic and nutrient-poor soils of the DRC, particularly the acid and xanthic Ferralsols of Haut-Katanga, impose significant limitations on nodulation and nitrogen fixation, due in particular to competition from inefficient indigenous strains, low levels of available phosphorus, or excessively low pH (Thies *et al.*, 1991 ; Richardson *et al.*, 2009 ; Nyoki, 2014). Conversely, more fertile soils such as certain Cambisols can reduce symbiotic engagement when nutrients are abundant (Denison *et al.*,

2004 ; Graham, 2008 ; Reid *et al.*, 2011), highlighting the need for differentiated inoculation strategies (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, this study aims to analyze the cross effect of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strains and soybean varieties on three soils representative of Haut-Katanga (Ferralsol acrique, Ferralsol xanthique, Cambisol eutrique), in order to identify the optimal soil-strain-variety combinations to improve soybean productivity and contribute to the regeneration of tropical soils.

## ENVIRONMENT AND METHODS

### Study environment

The soils of Lubumbashi and its surroundings are of polygenic origin and derive mainly from the Precambrian basement of the Lubumbashi syncline, dominated by the shales of the Kundelungu series. They are characterized by a high clay content, a low cation exchange capacity ( $\text{CEC} < 16 \text{ cmol} \cdot \text{kg}^{-1}$ , kaolinite), and are rich in iron and aluminum sesquioxides. The average pH of the water is approximately 5.2, indicating marked acidity (Kasongo *et al.*, 2013). The local climate is classified as CW6 according to Köppen, with a rainy season from November to March and a dry season from May to September. Average annual rainfall reaches 1270 mm, with extreme values ranging from 717 to 1770 mm, and the average annual temperature is around  $20^\circ\text{C}$ . (Kasongo *et al.*, 2013 ; Louis *et al.*, 2015 ; Tshibuyi *et al.*, 2019). The ombrothermic diagram (Figure 1) highlights seasonal variations in potential evapotranspiration (PET) and temperatures, providing key information for interpreting climatic processes influencing crop growth in the region.

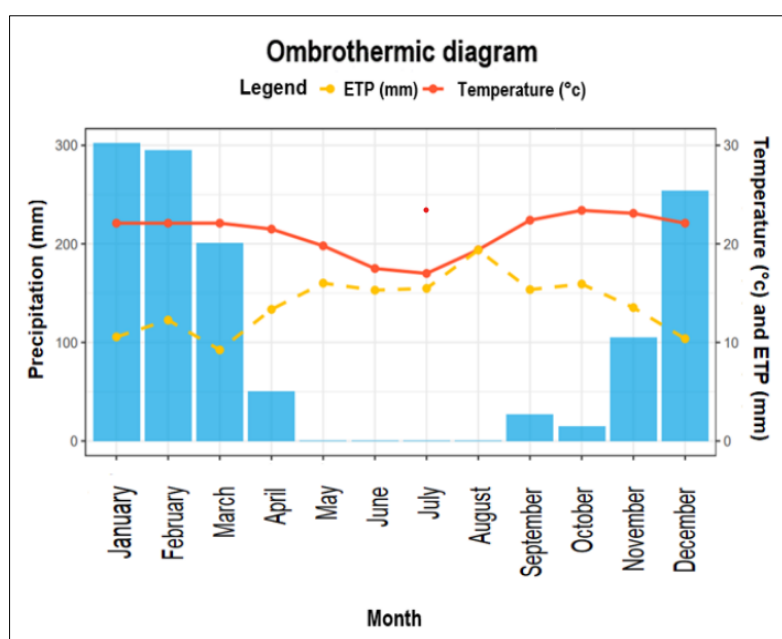


Figure 1: Ombrothermic diagram ETP : Potential evapotranspiration (Climate data from the Luano airport meteorological station)

### Description of the soils at the experimental sites

The experiments were conducted at three sites with distinct altitudes and vegetation types. The Kanyameshi station (1303 m) is dominated by *Tithonia*

*diversifolia* and *Hyparhenia rufa*. The Eliora farm site (1190 m) is characterized by a wooded savanna, while the Katandula farm (1224 m) is distinguished by a grassy savanna dominated by *Hyparhenia rufa* (Figure 2).

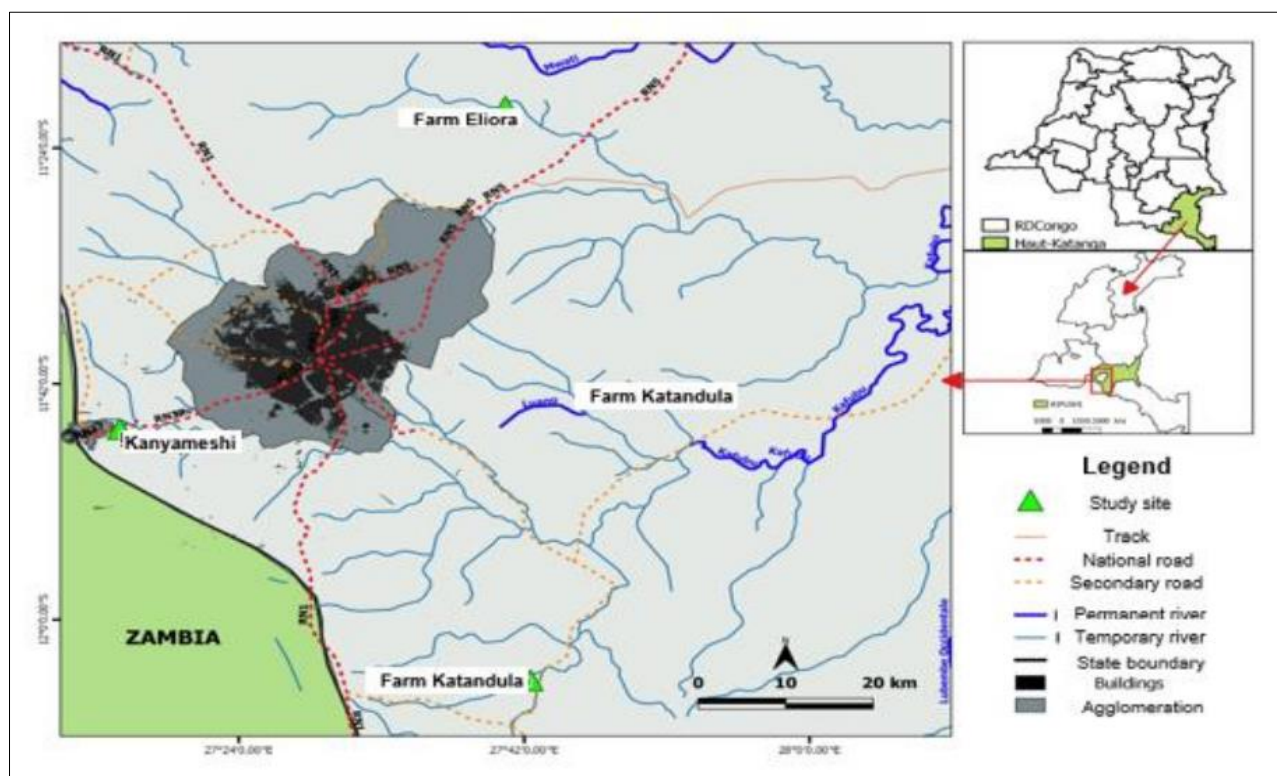


Figure 2: Location of experimental study sites

## METHODOLOGY

### Study sites

The study was conducted using a split-plot design to evaluate the effect of three strains of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* compared to an uninoculated control on five soybean varieties (*Glycine max* (L.) Merrill). Each strain-variety combination was replicated three times per site, resulting in twenty treatments. The experimental design and analysis were conceived according to Dagnelie (2012) and the recommendations of Montgomery (2017)

### Plant material and inoculants

Five soybean varieties were used : Pka06 (V1) and Imperial (V2) from INERA Mulungu (Bukavu), SAFARI MX (V3) and KAFUE (V4) from SEED CO (Zambia), and the local variety TGX1893-10F (V5) from INERA KIPopo. Three strains of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* (USDA strains) from the Agricultural Research Service (NRRL, USA) were tested.

### Sowing and inoculation

Sowing was carried out at a spacing of  $0.40 \times 0.20$  m (density  $\approx 375,000$  plants $\cdot$ ha $^{-1}$ ), with three seeds per hill. Seed inoculation was performed according to a standardized protocol: preparation of a sugar adhesive (120 g sugar/250 ml lukewarm water), moistening of 10

kg of seeds, addition of 100 g of inoculum, and homogenization to ensure coating. The seeds were dried in the shade ( $\sim 10$  min) and then sown rapidly in moist, prepared soil, with the exception of uninoculated control plots.

### Soil sampling

Soil samples were collected at the flowering stage ( $\approx 50\%$  flowering) from the rhizosphere of plants in the central rows, using a hand auger in the 0–20 cm layer, in accordance with Moreira *et al.* (2012). Five planting holes per plot were sampled, the roots slightly uprooted ; the rhizosphere was shaken into labeled bags, air-dried, sieved to 2 mm and shipped to the laboratory.

### Physico-chemical analyses (ZARI laboratory)

The analyses were carried out at the Soil Fertility Laboratory (ZARI, Mt. Makulu, Lusaka). The following parameters were measured using standard methods: pH (1 M KCl), exchangeable acidity ( $\text{Al}_3^+$ ,  $\text{H}^+$ ) by KCl extraction, organic carbon (potassium dichromate), total nitrogen (Kjeldahl method), mineral forms  $\text{NH}_4^+$ ,  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{NO}_2^-$  (KCl extraction), available phosphorus (extraction + spectrophotometry), exchangeable cations (Ca, Mg by AAS; K, Na by flame photometry), and cation exchange capacity (CEC). The methods and protocols used comply with current

references and standards (Black *et al.* (1965); Bray RH *et al.*, 1945; Kalra *et al.*, 1991; McKeague, 1978; Motomizu *et al.*, 1983); Potash and Phosphate Institute (1979); Richards, 1954).

### Agronomic and biological measures

Symbiotic efficiency was assessed according to four groups of variables: emergence rate (estimated from 50% germination), vegetative growth (stem height and diameter at the collar measured on 5 random plants at the beginning of flowering), nodulation (total number of nodules and active nodules assessed by incision and internal staining) and yield components (number of pods/plant, weight of 1000 seeds, yield extrapolated to ha after harvest, threshing and winnowing).

### Analyses

The collected data were subjected to a three-way ANOVA to assess the effects of soil type, *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strains, and soybean varieties on the measured parameters. Post-hoc LSD tests were applied to differentiate means in cases of significant differences, with a significance level set at 5%. The analysis was performed using R 4.0.3 software. The specific effects of strain-variety interactions were explored separately for each soil type to assess the specific behaviors of the soils in relation to the other factors (varieties and strains).

## RESULTS

### Variability of soybean vegetative parameters according to *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strains and soil types: Results of the analysis of variance

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that soybean vegetative, nodulation, and yield parameters are strongly influenced by soil type, variety, and, in some cases, their interaction with *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strains. Emergence rate (Figure 3a) is significantly affected by soil and variety, with both soil  $\times$  strain and soil  $\times$  variety interactions. Eutric Cambisol and strain S3 exhibit the best performance, while TGX-1893-10F shows the lowest values. Collar diameter (Figure 3b) also depends on soil and variety, with a soil  $\times$  strain interaction, the largest diameters being observed on Xanthic Ferralsol. Plant height (Figure 3c) is influenced by soil, variety, and all interactions, including the triple interaction, revealing complex combined effects. Fresh biomass (Figure 3d) is determined primarily by soil and variety, with soil  $\times$  strain and soil  $\times$  variety interactions, the best combination being Xanthic Ferralsol–S3–Pka 06. Leaf area (Figure 3f) depends on soil and variety but is not affected by strain. For nodulation (Figures 3e–3g), no isolated effect is observed, but the triple soil  $\times$  strain  $\times$  variety interaction is significant, with strains S1–S3 improving nodulation compared to the control. Regarding fruiting (Figures 3h–3j), the number of pods and the 100-seed weight are influenced by soil, variety, and certain interactions, with fertile soils and strains S1–S3 improving these parameters, while yield per hectare is not significantly affected by any factor, suggesting a strong influence of uncontrolled external conditions.

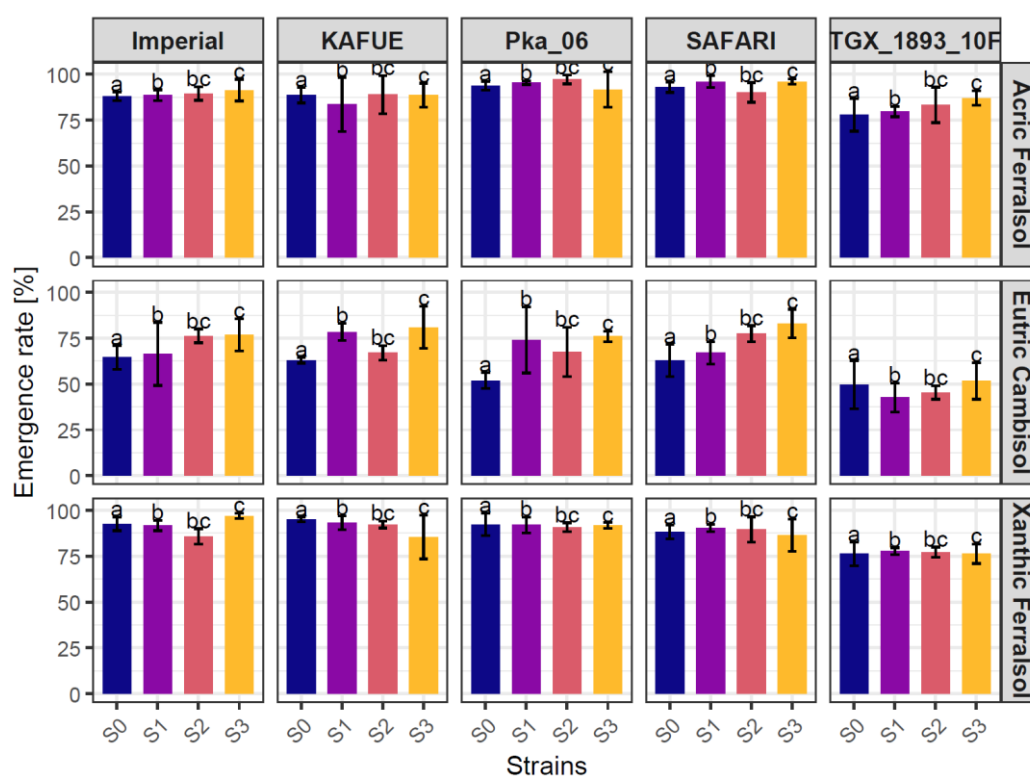


Figure 3a



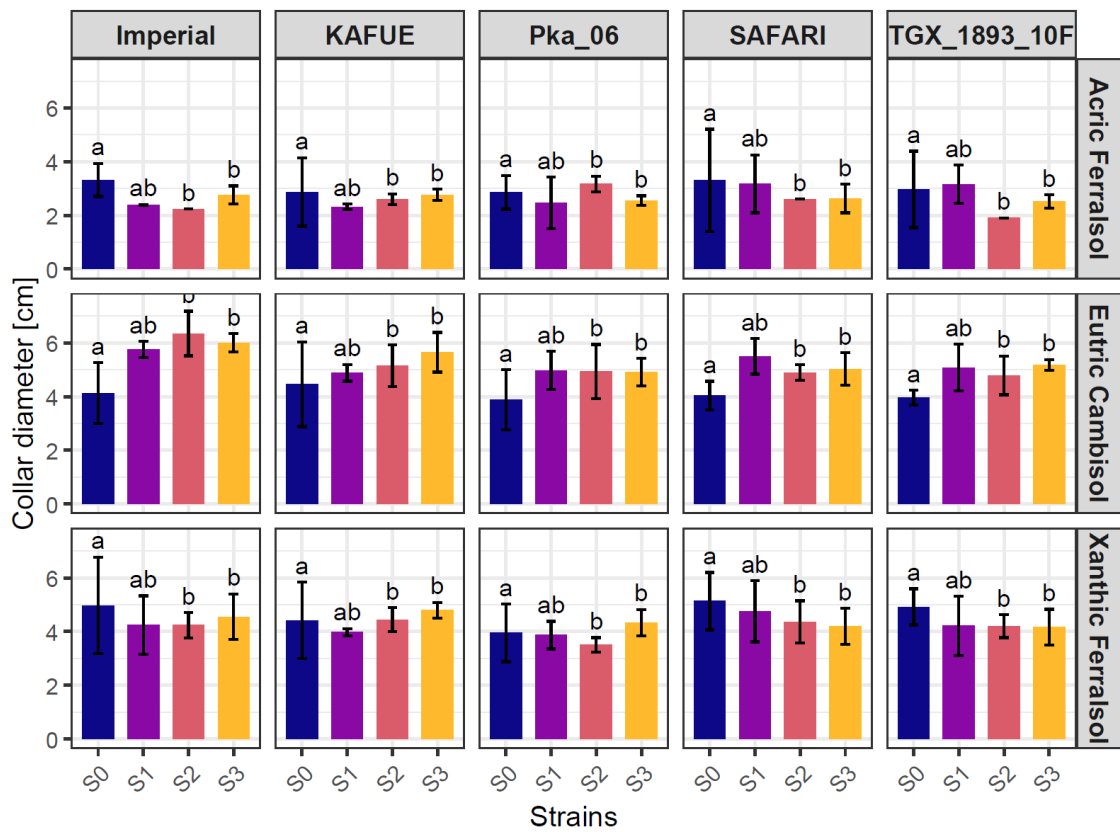


Figure 3b

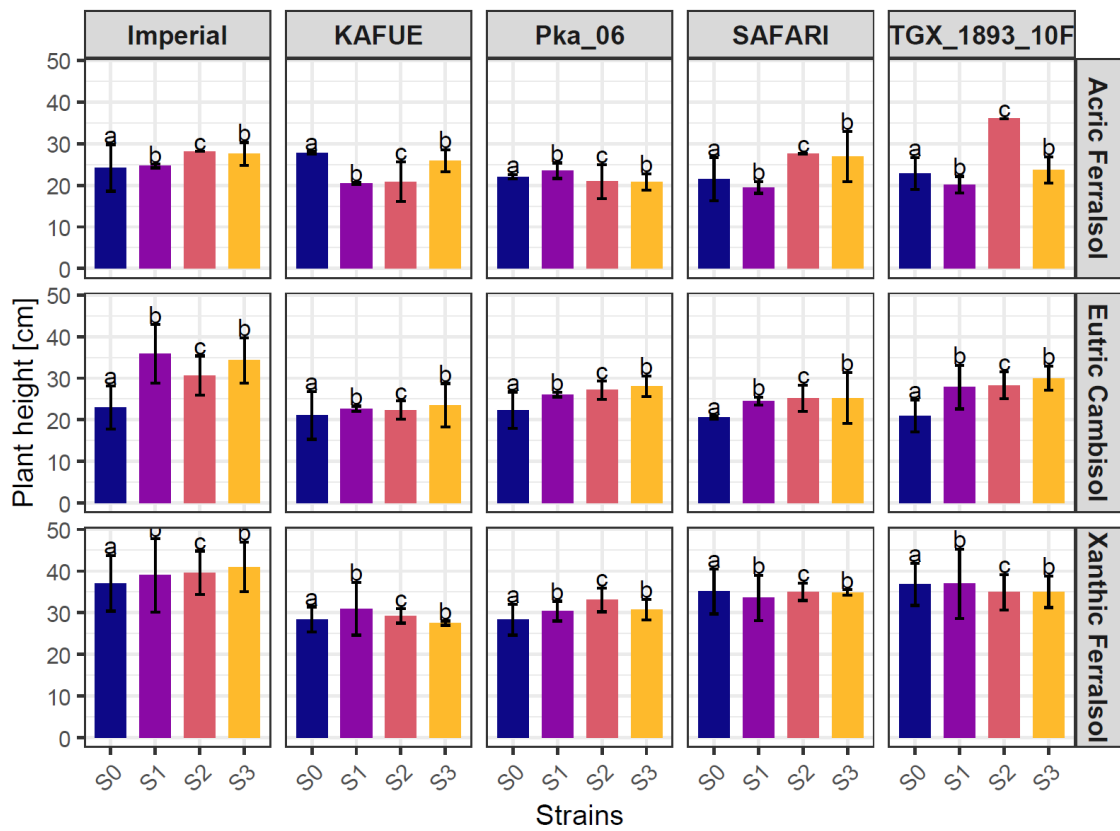


Figure 3c

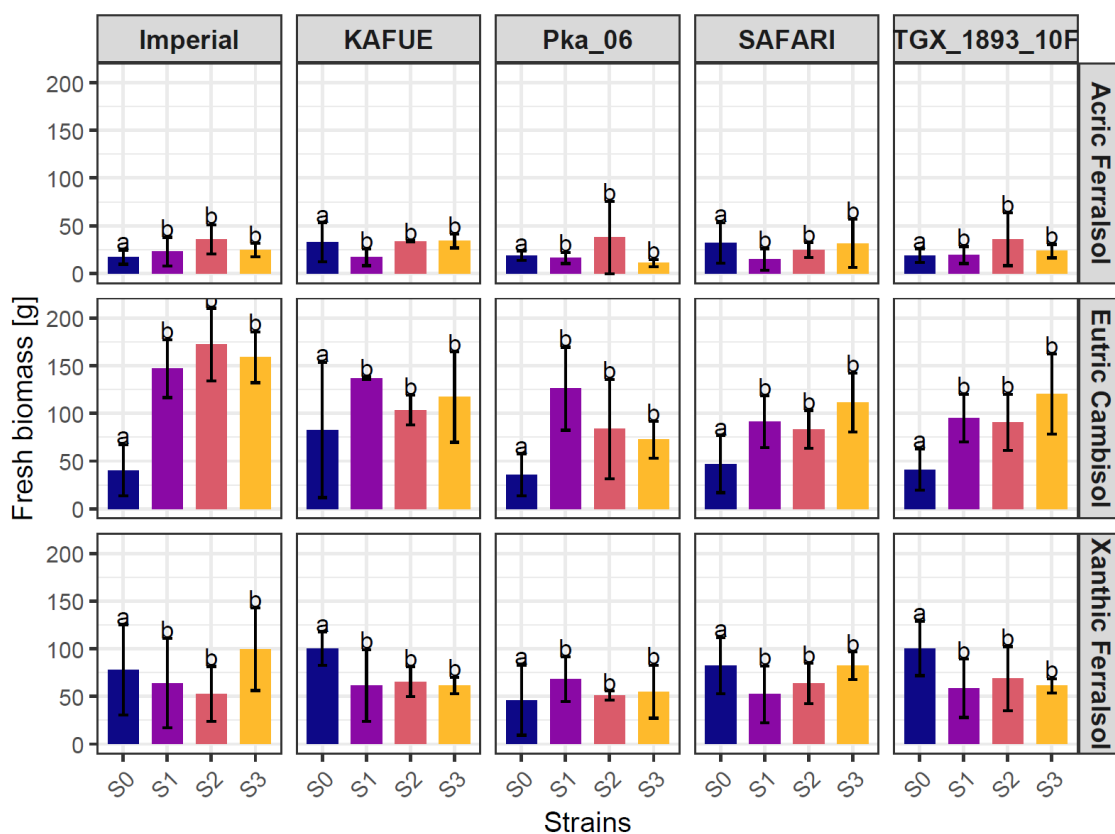


Figure 3d

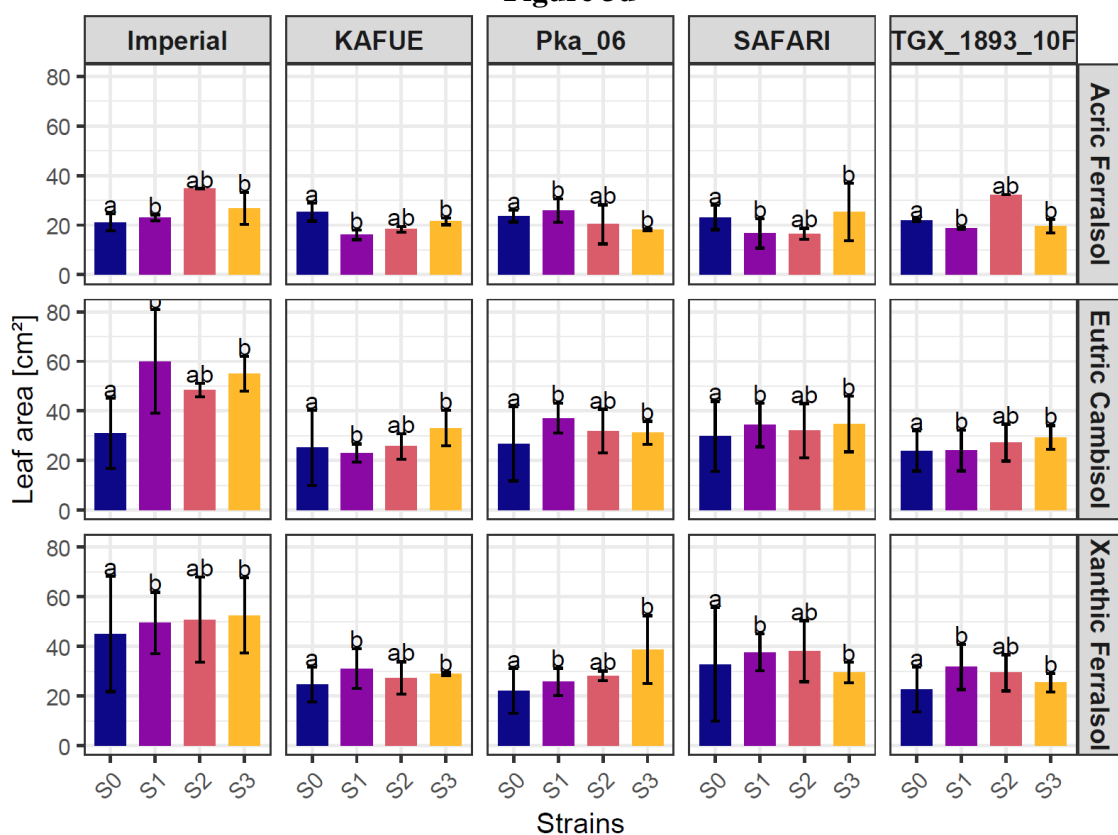


Figure 3e

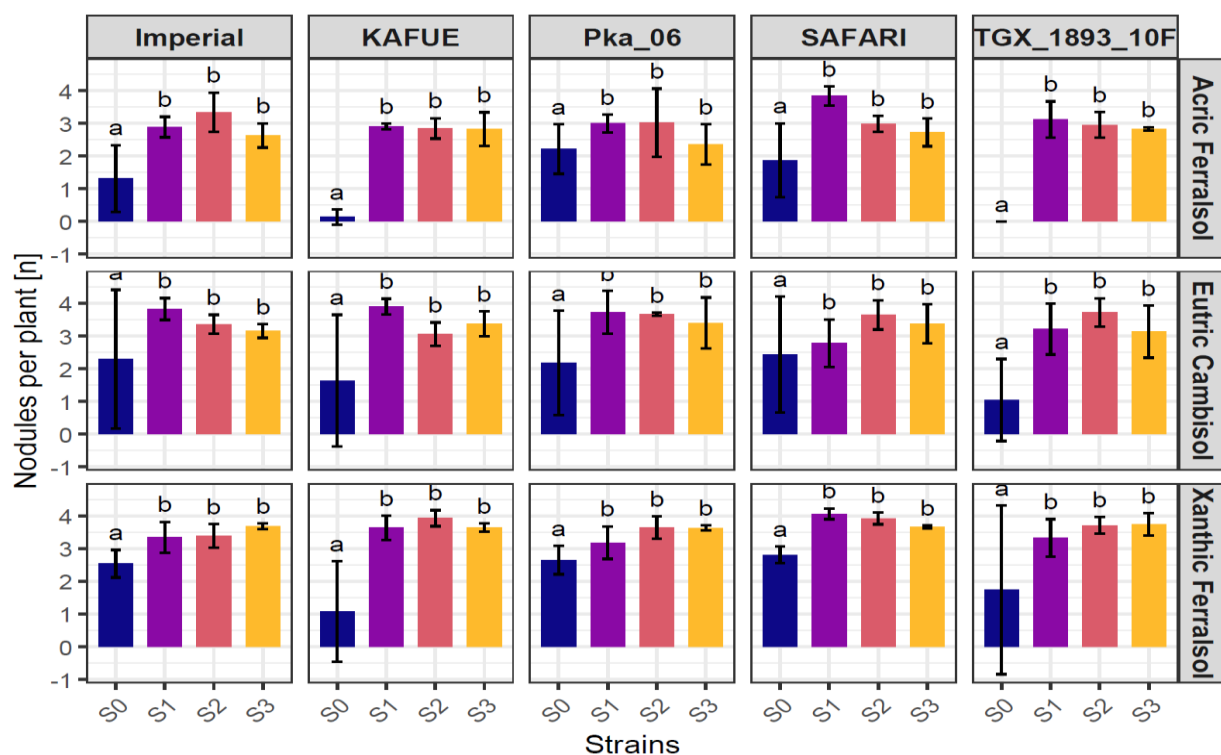


Figure 3f

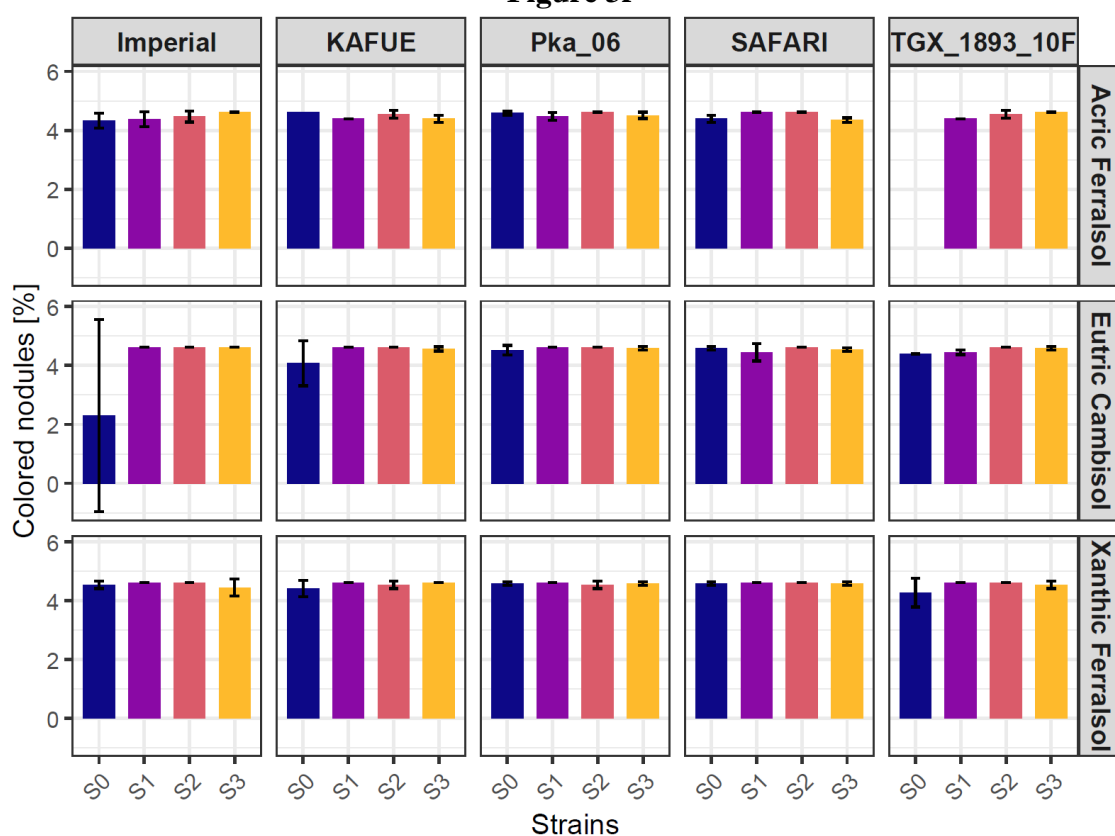


Figure 3g

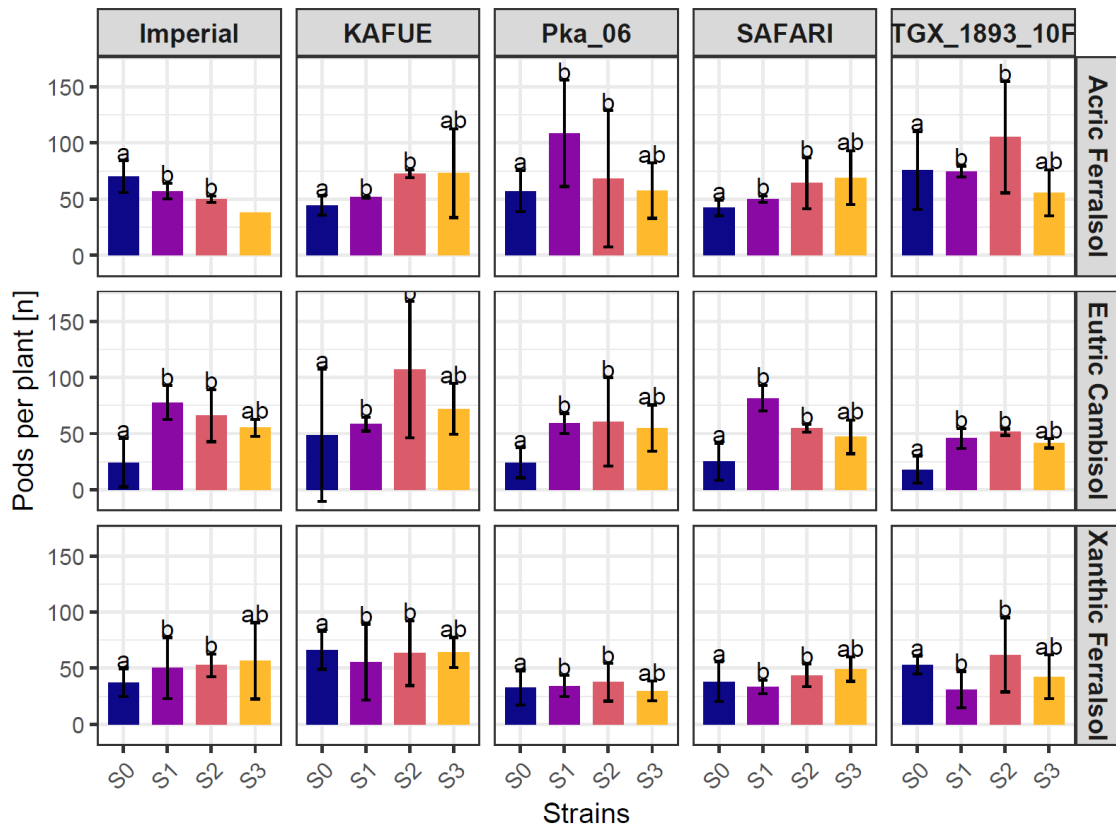


Figure 3h

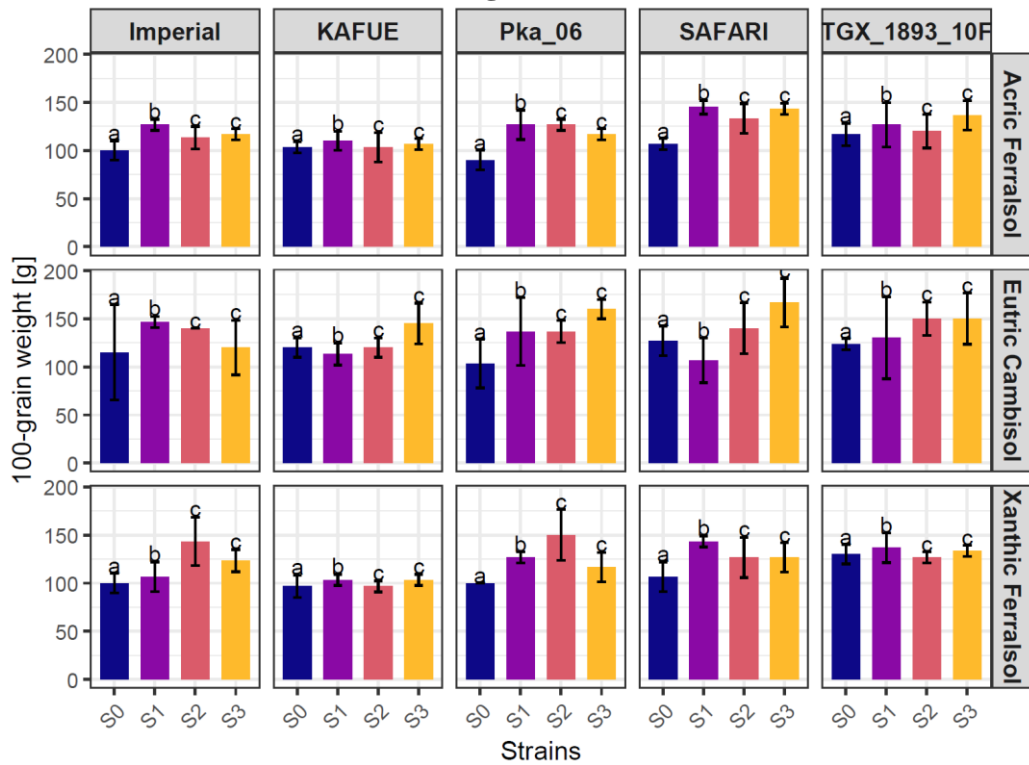


Figure 3i



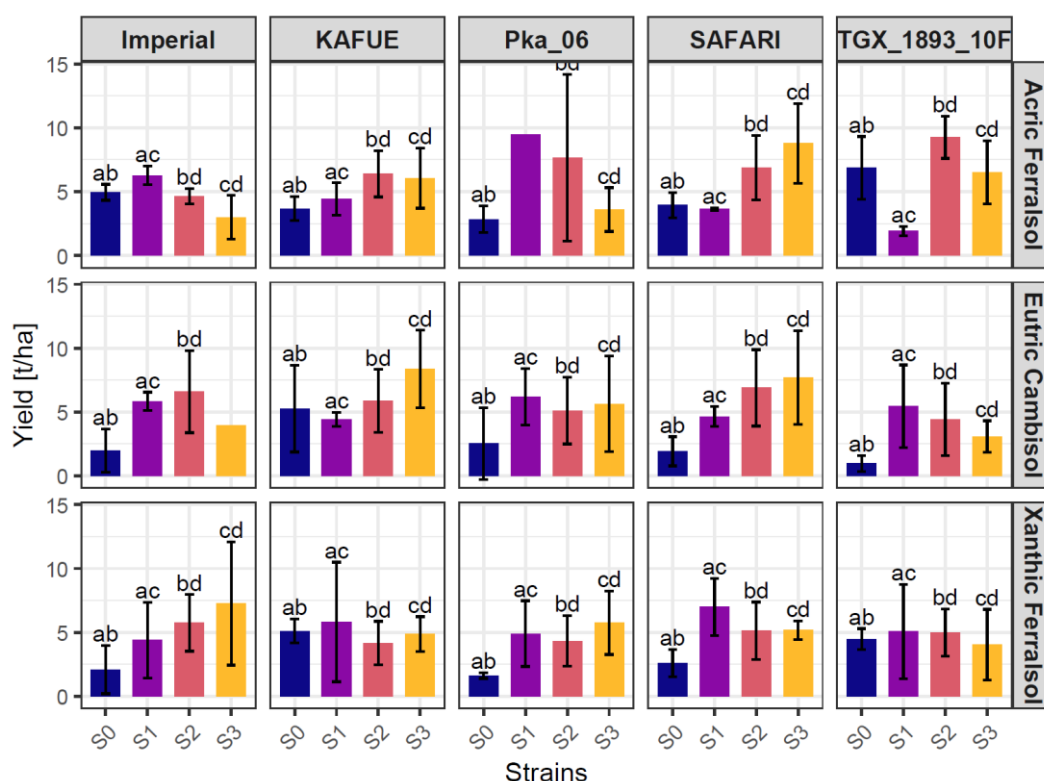


Figure 3j

Figure 3: Relationships between the agronomic performance of different soybean varieties and strains of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* (S1 : USDA 110, S2: USDA 136 and S3: USDA 142) according to soil type : a) Emergence rate ; b) Collar diameter ; c) Plant heightplants ; d) Fresh biomass ; e) Leaf area ; f) Number of nodules per plant ; g) Number of colored nodules per plant ; h) Number of pods per plant ; i) Weight of 100 seeds ; j) Yield (t/ha)

### Correlation between vegetative parameters, soybean yields and the physicochemical characteristics of different soil types in Lubumbashi

The positive correlations observed between soil chemical properties and soybean morpho-physiological traits ( $p < 0.001$ ) highlight the major importance of chemical fertility for vegetative performance. Parameters such as calcium (Ca), cation exchange capacity (CEC), base saturation, and pH are positively associated with plant height, collar diameter, aboveground biomass, leaf area, and nodule number, contributing to mineral nutrition, cell structure, physiological signaling, and the establishment of symbiosis with *Bradyrhizobium*.

Conversely, soil acidity and, unexpectedly, total and available phosphorus levels are negatively correlated

with growth and yield parameters. This paradox can be explained by the fixation of phosphorus in acidic soils as Fe-P or Al-P complexes, making it less available to plants despite its apparent presence.

The lack of significant correlations with grain yield highlights a decoupling between vegetative growth and final productivity. This indicates that, even with fertile soil, production is highly dependent on abiotic factors (water stress, temperature, light) and biotic factors (pathogens, pests), particularly during the reproductive phase. These results underscore the importance of an integrated crop management approach to optimize soybean yield.

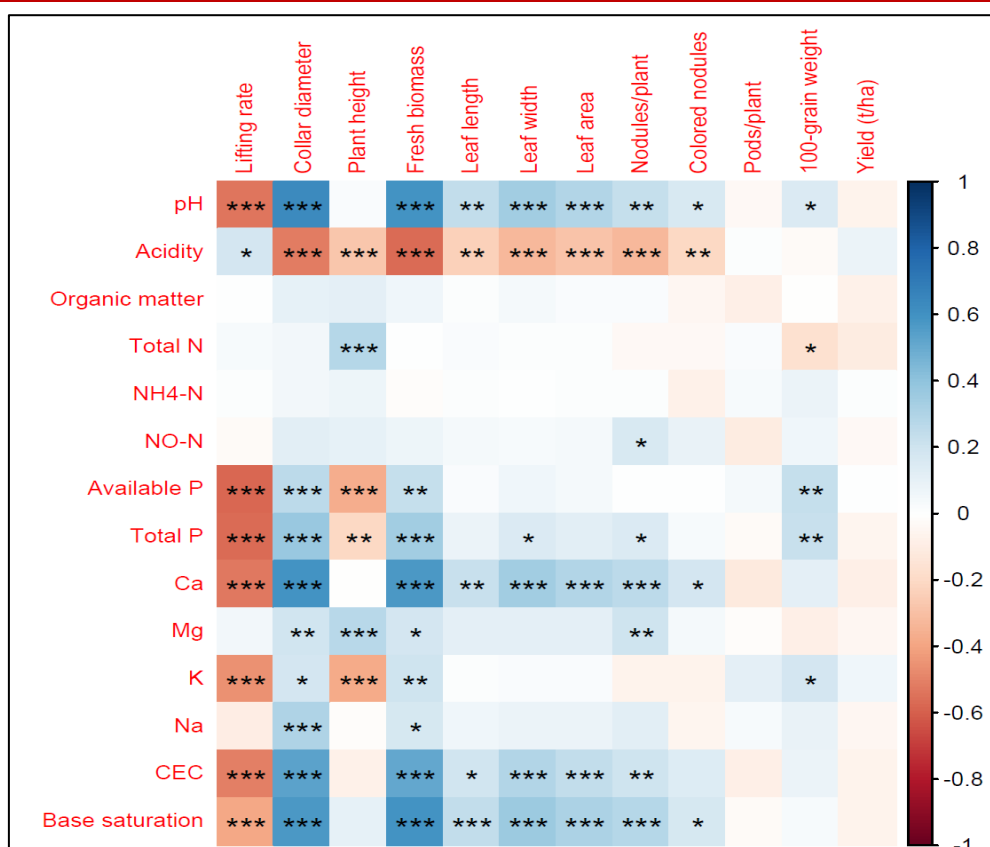


Figure 4: Pearson correlation between vegetative parameters, soybean yield and physico-chemical parameters of soils

#### Influence of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strains on soil chemical parameters

Comparative analysis of soil chemical properties between plots inoculated with different strains of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* (S1, S2, S3) and the uninoculated control plot (S0) reveals a limited influence of bacterial inoculation on soil chemistry. Indeed, soil pH showed no significant variation between the different treatments in the three soil types studied (Table 1), suggesting short-term stability of this property, independent of inoculation.

Regarding available phosphorus, inoculated and uninoculated plots showed similar levels in eutric (loamic) Cambisols and acrid (vetic) Ferralsols. However, an exception was observed in xanthic (vetic) Ferralsols, where inoculation with strain S2 was

associated with a significant decrease in available phosphorus compared to the control plot. This result indicates an indirect effect of the strain on phosphorus dynamics, potentially linked to specific microbial interactions or increased phosphorus mobilization by the plant. Nevertheless, total phosphorus levels remained unchanged regardless of the treatment applied.

Furthermore, other soil chemical properties, including total nitrogen, mineral forms of nitrogen ( $\text{NH}_4^+$ -N and  $\text{NO}_3^-$ -N), cation exchange capacity (CEC), organic matter, and base saturation, were not significantly influenced by the application of the different *Bradyrhizobium* strains. These results show that, under the study conditions, inoculation did not significantly alter the main soil chemical properties.

Table 1: Chemical properties of the soil at flowering according to different soil types and strains of *Bradyrhizobium japonicum*

Floors	Strains	pH KCl	Available-P	Total-P	Total-N	NH <sub>4</sub> -N	NO <sub>3</sub> -N	CEC	Organic Matter	Base Saturation
Eutric (loamic) cambisols	S0	4.6±0.1	4.7 ± 0.6 abc	217.3±7.6	0.24 ± 0.01 c	4.8±0.2	23.6±1.2	6.7±0.4	2.7-0.2	105-0.5
	S1	4.5±0.2	5.4±1 abc	210.7±9.1	0.21 ± 0.01 abc	4.8±0.3	24.2±1.7	6.8±0.5	2.3-0.2	102.3-1.7
	S2	4.4±0.1	3.7±0.6 a	216.7±6.7	0.2 ± 0.01 abc	4.7±0.3	21.6±1	5.6±0.2	2.3-0.2	103.6-0.5
	S3	4.4±0.1	3.8±0.3 ab	214.7±7.7	0.22 ± 0.01 bc	4.9±0.3	20.7±1.3	6.8±0.3	2.5-0.1	104.5-0.5
Mean		4.5±0.1 B		4.4 ± 0.3 A	214.8±3.8 A	0.22±0 B	4.8±0.1	22.5±0.7	6.5±0.2 B	2.5-0.1 B
	S0	4.2±0.2	7.3±0.8 bc	217.3±8.9	0.18±0.01 ab	5±0.4	19.8±1.2	5.9±0.4	1.8-0.3	86.1-5.3
	S1	4±0.1	7.7±0.8 c	230±12.2	0.18±0.01 abc	5±0.2	20.2±1.5	5.1±0.5	1.9-0.3	89.9-2.6

Ferralsols acriques (Vetic)	S2	4±0.1	8.4±1 c	230.7±12.9	0.2 ± 0.01 abc	5.9±0.7	21.7±1.6	5.2±0.4	1.9-0.3	85.7-4.4	
	S3	3.8±0	6.3±0.7 bc	204.7±6.3	0.22 ± 0.02 abc	4.8±0.5	24.3±2.3	4.7±0.3	2-0.3	78.9-3.7	
Mean		4±0.1 A		7.4±0.4 B	220.5±5.2 A	0.19 ± 0.68 A	5.2±0 .2	21.5±0 .9	5.2 ± 0.2 A	1.9-0.1 A	85-2.1 A
Xanthic Ferralso ls (Vetic)	S0	5.6±0.1	54.3±3.5 e	662±61.4	0.2 ± 0.01 abc	5.7±1	22.1±2	10.2±0.5	2.2-0.2	106.4-0.6	
	S1	5.6±0.1	37.3±4.8 de	591.3±54.1	0.17±0.02 abc	4.6±0.3	19.5±1.3	9.6±0.2	2.2-0.2	105.6-0.2	
	S2	5.4±0.2	29±4 d	498±45.6	0.14±0.02 a	5.5±0.4	24.9±1.7	8.5±0.6	2-0.2	105.3-0.3	
	S3	5.7±0.1	39.1±3.3 de	610±45.8	0.13±0.02 a	5±0.3	24.4±1.8	9.7±0.3	2.1-0.2	105.6-0.2	
Mean		5.6 ± 0.1 B		39.9±2.3 C	590.3±26.5 B	0.16±0.0 1 A	5.2±0 .3	22.7±0 .9	9.5±0.2 C	2.1-0.1 AB	105.7-0.2 C
S0		4.8-0.1		22.1-3.6 b	365.6-37.6	0.205- 0.007	5.1±0 .4	21.8±0 .9	7.6±0.4 b	2.3-0.1	99.1-2.2
S1		4.7-0.1		17-2.8 ab	346.6-32.7	0.188- 0.008	4.8±0 .2	21.3±0 .9	7.2±0.4 ab	2.1-0.1	99.5-1.4
S2		4.6-0.1		13.7-2.1 a	315.1-25	0.178- 0.01	5.3±0 .3	22.7±0 .8	6.4 ± 0.3 a	2.1-0.1	98.2-2
S3		4.7-0.1		16.4-2.7 ab	343.1-32.3	0.188- 0.011	4.9±0 .2	23.1±1 .1	7.1±0.3 ab	2.2-0.1	96.3-2.2
Ground		0		0	0	0	0.963	0.2095	0	0.00228	0
Strains		0.419		0.0184	0.774	0.2797	0.55	0.3935	0.0148	0.73582	0.0688
Variety		0.94		0.406	0.686	0.1228	0.721	0.4921	0.2629	0.77254	0.2697
Sites : Strains		0.433		0.0133	0.339	0.0182	0.62	0.0758	0.356	0.88534	0.4983
Sites : Variety		0.768		0.2087	0.656	0.772	0.714	0.7498	0.3965	0.64581	0.0795
Strains :		0.996		0.9627	0.983	0.9867	0.934	0.3965	0.9718	0.89464	0.8941
Variety											
Sites : Strains:		0.999		0.5226	0.637	0.9764	0.716	0.9883	0.9269	0.69130	0.9291
Variety											

## DISCUSSION

### Influence of soil type and tree stumps *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* on the productivity and agro-physiological parameters of soybeans

The study results confirm that the interaction between soil types, *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strains, and soybean varieties significantly influences vegetative growth, nodulation, and soybean productivity in the tropical context of Haut-Katanga. This synergistic interaction between soil, genotype, and inoculant was also highlighted by Solomon *et al.* (2012) and Tshibuyi *et al.* (2019).

From a pedological point of view, unlike acid Ferralsols, xanthic Ferralsols and eutric Cambisols allowed better vegetative growth (height, collar diameter, biomass), linked to a more favorable chemical composition: moderate pH, more available phosphorus and calcium (Mukalay, 2016; Tetteh *et al.*, 2017). These observations corroborate the work of (Laurent *et al.*, 1998; Argaw *et al.*, 2014; Temegne *et al.*, 2015; olive, *et al.*, 2019) according to which the low availability of phosphorus, often linked to its fixation by iron and aluminum oxides, constitutes a major constraint in acidic tropical soils.

Regarding nodulation, strain USDA 110 (S1) proved particularly effective, especially on eutric Cambisols, which confirms the observations of Woomer *et al.* (2012) and Giller *et al.* (2011) on strain-soil specificity in terms of symbiotic efficacy. The color and size of the nodules, recognized as functional indicators, are well documented by olive *et al.* (2019). Conversely,

acid Ferralsols, characterized by excessive acidity, exhibited reduced nodulation, a phenomenon largely attributed to the inhibitory effect of acidic pH (Chimdi *et al.*, 2022; Nyoki *et al.*, 2014).

A paradoxical result was observed, however: despite lower nodulation, the acid Ferralsols generated the highest yields. This phenomenon could be explained by a redistribution of resources towards pod formation, as suggested by Solomon *et al.* (2012). Furthermore, certain strains such as S2 and S3 have shown variable effects on yields, highlighting the functional diversity of *Bradyrhizobium* strains (Okereke *et al.*, 2001 ; Abaidoo *et al.*, 2007).

Inoculation also led to an improvement in pH and exchangeable cation levels (Ca, Mg) in Ferralsols, reflecting the positive impact of rhizobial symbiosis on the regeneration of acidic soils via microbial activity. (Nyoki *et al.*, 2018; McCully, 2001; Lazali *et al.*, 2020). These results corroborate the work of Kebede (2021) and Wobeng *et al.*, (2020), which show that legumes, through biological nitrogen fixation and microbial stimulation, contribute to the sustainability of tropical soil fertility.

However, despite strong nodulation and increased vegetative growth, eutric Cambisol underwent a slight chemical regression. This decline could be explained by its initially high fertility, thus limiting the marginal response to inoculation (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). Similar results were obtained by Książak *et al.*, (2022), which highlight increased effectiveness of inoculation

when coupled with nitrogen fertilization, particularly in soils of moderate or low fertility.

In addition, several studies, including those of Lesueur *et al.* (1994) a Studies have shown that co-inoculation (e.g., with *Azospirillum*) or the use of amendments such as biochar or lime can significantly improve nodulation and productivity in acidic soils. This supports the integrated and localized optimization approach to symbiotic performance in soybeans.

Finally, beyond biological and chemical factors, the success of inoculation depends heavily on soil conditions and agricultural practices (Revellin *et al.*, 1996) These results highlight the need for an integrated agro-ecological approach, combining inoculant management, targeted fertilization and improvement of soil physical and chemical properties, to promote sustainable soybean productivity in sub-Saharan Africa (Dugué *et al.*, 2024).

#### **Differential responses to inoculation depending on soil properties**

The results demonstrate that the response of soybeans to inoculation with *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* is closely dependent on the physicochemical characteristics of the soil, including pH, phosphorus (P) availability, nitrogen (N) content, and the presence of native rhizobial populations. These observations confirm the work of Richardson *et al.* (2009), Nyoki *et al.*, (2014) and KC *et al.*, (2019), which highlight the central role of these parameters in soybean nodulation and growth.

In eutric Cambisols, despite their initially high fertility, inoculation did not always lead to improved yield. This result supports the hypotheses of Denison *et al.*, (2004) and Graham (2008), according to which plants tend to limit their symbiotic associations when resources are sufficient, in order to optimize their energy metabolism.

The variability in response to inoculation between soil types can also be attributed to competition between introduced strains and native rhizobial populations. In tropical soils, the latter are often abundant but inefficient, which can limit the benefits of inoculation (Thies *et al.*, 1991; Rodríguez-Navarro *et al.*, 2011; Grönemeyer *et al.*, 2014). The success of inoculation therefore depends on the competitiveness of the strain, its persistence in the soil (Mendoza-Suárez *et al.*, 2021) and its ability to preferentially colonize nodules (Chibeba *et al.*, 2017).

Ferralsols, despite their nutrient deficiencies and acidity, showed a notable agronomic response after inoculation. These results confirm the potential of legumes to restore degraded soils. (Manyong *et al.*, 1996; Kasongo *et al.*, 2013), particularly through symbiotic nitrogen fixation and the input of organic matter via

biomass decomposition (Jensen *et al.*, 2020; Thapa *et al.*, 2021). Justes *et al.* (2014) They specify that the processes of complementarity and facilitation between plants promote the acquisition of resources, particularly in conditions of nutritional deficiency.

The effectiveness of inoculation also varies depending on the soybean genotype. Some cultivars show specificity in nodulation, while others adopt a free nodulation strategy (N'Gbesso *et al.*, 2010). This underscores the importance of the link between varietal selection and agronomic management, including the choice of the appropriate rhizobial strain. Furthermore, co-inoculation with mycorrhizal fungi can enhance synergistic effects on growth and nutrition, as shown by Cornet *et al.*, (1982) and Duponnois *et al.* (2013).

Finally, various abiotic factors such as phosphorus availability, organic matter, or nitrate levels influence the response to inoculation (Nápoles *et al.*, 2009). Beugre *et al.* (2013) have shown that inoculation is particularly effective in soils poor in native rhizobia.

In summary, the results obtained in Haut-Katanga are part of a broader body of scientific evidence demonstrating that inoculation cannot be approached uniformly. It must be considered within a systemic framework that takes into account soil type, the density and effectiveness of native strains, plant needs, and interactions with other microorganisms. In sub-Saharan African agricultural systems, legumes remain a strategic tool for improving soil fertility, provided that practices are adapted to local ecological realities (Van Zwieten *et al.*, 2015; Naudin, 2009; Alabouvette *et al.*, 2018).

#### **Legumes and the regeneration of tropical soil fertility: A lever for sustainability**

This study confirms that the response of soybeans to inoculation with *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* is modulated by the specific soil characteristics of Haut-Katanga, highlighting the need for differentiated management of agricultural practices. In the acid and xanthic Ferralsols, characterized by high acidity and low nutrient availability, inoculation with effective strains such as S1 (USDA 110) and S3 (USDA 142) resulted in a significant improvement in soybean growth, accompanied by edaphic benefits: increased pH, enrichment in exchangeable cations, and improved phosphorus availability. These results are consistent with those of Lazali *et al.* (2020) and Matías-Ramos *et al.* (2023), which highlight the role of legumes in the regeneration of tropical soils.

Conversely, in eutric Cambisols, rich in native rhizobia, the effects of inoculation were limited, or even absent, when the microbial density exceeded the critical threshold of 100 cells/g of soil (Thies *et al.*, 1991). In this case, the intense competition for nodule colonization reduces the effectiveness of the introduced strains. An

alternative strategy would be to plant legumes at the end of the rotation to limit nutrient depletion while benefiting from residual effects on subsequent crops (Carsky *et al.*, 1997; Zoundji *et al.*, 2024).

The success of inoculation also depends on strain-plant compatibility, application methods, and soil biological quality, as shown by Lupwayi *et al.* (2006) and Lesueur *et al.* (1994). In tropical areas, where soils are often degraded and poor in organic matter, legumes play a central role: they restructure soils, improve water retention, and contribute to the sustainability of agroecosystems (Roose, 2007).

From an economic standpoint, the adoption of inoculation remains contingent on its perceived profitability. As noted Saint Macary *et al.* (1990), Despite its agronomic potential, its large-scale deployment depends on the cost-benefit ratio, the accessibility of inoculants and technical support for farmers.

The integration of legumes into cropping systems through rotation or association improves the sustainability of agro-ecosystems. Van Zwieten *et al.* (2015) and Guinet (2019) They point out that the nitrogen fixed biologically by these crops reduces dependence on chemical fertilizers and promotes more resilient agriculture. Furthermore, as suggested De França *et al.*, (1970) And Bado, (2002) Combining inoculation with other interventions, such as the application of natural phosphate or the correction of soil acidity, enhances its benefits.

Finally, although the positive effects of inoculation are well established for soybeans (Aliyu *et al.*, 2013; Razafintsalama *et al.*, 2022), Some uncertainties remain regarding the necessity of reinoculation at each cycle and the adaptability of this practice to other legumes. It is therefore essential to continue research to assess the persistence of strains in tropical soils and their integration into long-term microbial dynamics.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this study highlights the crucial importance of interactions between soil type, *Bradyrhizobium japonicum* strain, and soybean variety in modulating agronomic performance and fertility regeneration dynamics in tropical soils. The results showed that inoculation efficacy varies significantly according to edaphic characteristics, particularly pH, phosphorus availability, and initial fertility, influencing nodulation, vegetative growth, and yield. Ferralsols, although poorer, benefited from progressive chemical improvement under the influence of effective strains, reflecting the potential of legumes to restore acidic soils. In contrast, fertile Cambisols exhibited a more moderate response to inoculation, suggesting biological saturation

or weak symbiotic activation in the presence of abundant resources. Thus, the agronomic response of soybeans to inoculation is neither uniform nor linear, but strongly dependent on the local pedological and biological context. These results highlight the need for targeted agroecological approaches, integrating the selection of adapted strains, a detailed knowledge of soils and reasoned planning of rotations, in order to promote sustainable and resilient agriculture in tropical environments.

## Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to the University of Mwene Ditu, University of Lubumbashi and the Soil Fertility Laboratory (ZARI, Zambia) for their technical and logistical support throughout the implementation of this study.

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