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# Fate of ZnO nanoparticles in soils and cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*)

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**Abstract**

The increasing use of zinc oxide nanoparticles (ZnO-NPs) in various commercial products is prompting detailed investigation regarding the fate of these materials in the environment. There is, however, a lack of information comparing the transformation of ZnO-NPs with soluble $Zn^{2+}$ in both soils and plants. Synchrotron-based techniques were used to examine the uptake and transformation of Zn in various tissues of cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* (L.) Walp.) exposed to ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ following growth in either solution or soil culture. In solution culture, soluble Zn ($ZnCl_2$) was more toxic than the ZnO-NPs, although there was substantial accumulation of ZnO-NPs on the root surface. When grown in soil, however, there was no significant difference in plant growth and accumulation or speciation of Zn between soluble Zn and ZnO-NP treatments, indicating that the added ZnO-NPs underwent rapid dissolution following their entry into the soil. This was confirmed by an incubation experiment with two soils, in which ZnO-NPs could not be detected after incubation for 1 h. The speciation of Zn was similar in shoot tissues for both soluble Zn and ZnO-NPs treatments and no upward translocation of ZnO-NPs from roots to shoots was observed in either solution or soil culture. Under the current experimental conditions, the similarity in uptake and toxicity of Zn from ZnO-NPs and soluble Zn in soils indicates that the ZnO-NPs used in this study did not constitute nano-specific risks.

**Keywords:** ZnO nanoparticles, uptake, toxicity, transformation, soil, plant, zinc

19 **INTRODUCTION**

20 Engineered nanoparticles (ENPs) are being developed and incorporated into a variety of industrial,
21 commercial, and medicinal products. Zinc oxide nanoparticles (ZnO-NPs) are among the most commonly
22 used ENPs in personal care products (e.g. sunscreens, cosmetics), textiles, paintings, industrial coatings,
23 dye-sensitized solar cells, antibacterial agents, and optic and electronic materials.[1] In addition, ZnO-NPs
24 have been proposed as an effective Zn fertilizer to alleviate Zn deficiency in soils.[2] While some of these
25 commercial applications, and their relative exposure pathways (e.g. through the wastewater treatment
26 process), are unlikely to lead to the direct release of ZnO-NPs to the environment, others (e.g. fertilisers)
27 could lead to their direct release to the soil. As a novel and emerging class of products, the ecological risk
28 of ZnO-NPs is an important topic that is receiving increased scrutiny from both the scientific and
29 regulatory viewpoints.

30

31 Plants are an important component of the ecological system and serve as a potential pathway for the
32 transportation and accumulation of ENPs into the food chain.[3-5] There is evidence that particles up to 20
33 nm are taken up by plant cells through plasmodesmata and endocytosis.[6] Indeed, some studies have
34 demonstrated the uptake of ENPs by plants grown in solution culture. For example , Lin and Xing[7] used
35 transmission electron microscopy (TEM) to show that ZnO-NPs passed through the epidermis and cortex
36 of roots of *Lolium perenne* L. (ryegrass), but did not examine if they are present within the shoots. Zhu et
37 al.[3] used magnetization to show the uptake and subsequent transport of magnetite $Fe_3O_4$-NPs by
38 *Cucurbita maxima* (pumpkin) grown in solution culture. However, no $Fe_3O_4$-NPs (i.e. magnetic signals)
39 were detected in shoots of soil-cultured plants. This is similar to other soil- or sand-based studies, which
40 were unable to detect plant uptake of NPs. For example, no ZnO-NPs were detected in either roots [8] or
41 shoots [9] of wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) or in stems and pods of soybean (*Glycine max* (L.) Merr.) [10], and
42 no $CeO_2$ NPs were detected in leaves of maize (*Zea mays* L.).[11] These findings suggest that the growth
43 matrix affects the uptake of NPs, but, to our knowledge, there are no data quantifying the differences in
44 the uptake and transformation (i.e. the chemical form) of ZnO-NPs in various tissues of plants grown in
45 different growth matrices.

The absence of ZnO-NPs in shoots may be explained by their attachment to the soil particles or the rapid dissolution and transformation of ZnO-NPs upon entering the soil. Indeed, it has been suggested that ZnO-NPs undergo quick dissolution/transformation upon their release into the environment.[12-15] Although most ZnO-NPs released from consumer products are likely converted to other species before entering the soil as applied biosolids,[13] the application of ZnO-NPs as a Zn fertilizer (including as a foliar fertilizer) has also been proposed.[2] Indeed, there is growing interest in the use of ZnO-NPs as fertilizers as Zn deficiency is by far the most widespread micronutrient deficiency limiting crop production in the world.[16] In the case of soils, however, little is known about the fate of ZnO-NPs over time.

The aims of this study were (i) to compare the uptake and toxicity (and subsequent transformation) of ZnO-NPs and $ZnCl_2$ to inform the associated environmental risks, and (ii) to determine if there are any differences between the uptake of the Zn in soil or solution culture. In this study, we examined the speciation of Zn within various tissues of plants exposed to ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ in solution or soil culture and assessed the fate of ZnO-NPs over time in two soils (differing in chemical and physical properties).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Zinc Oxide Nanoparticles.** The ZnO-NP dispersion, synthesized by the hydrolysis of a zinc salt in a polyol medium heated to 160 °C, was purchased from Sigma Aldrich (catalog No. 721077). This product has a reported particle size < 100 nm measured by dynamic light scatting (DLS) and an average particle size < 35 nm measured using an aerodynamic particle sizer (APS) spectrometer. Our analyses of the suspensions used for the experiments by DLS using a Zetasizer Nano (Malvern Instruments, Worcestershire, UK) gave an average number-weighted particle size of 67 ± 2 nm and zeta potential of +46.1 ± 1.5 mV. Images analysed by field emission scanning electron microscopy (SEM, JEOL JSM 6400 F) indicated a crystallite size range of 20−30 nm.

72 **Plant Growth Conditions.** Both solution and soil culture experiments were conducted simultaneously in
73 a semi-controlled glasshouse in full sunlight at The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Australia. The
74 temperature was maintained at ca. 28°C during the day and 20°C during the night. Relative humidity
75 typically ranged between 25 and 50% during the day and 60 to 80% during the night.
76
77 *Solution Culture.* Seeds of cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* (L.) Walp. cv. Red Caloona) were germinated in
78 trays covered with paper towel moistened with tap water. After 2 d, seedlings were transferred to
79 containers with 11 L of nutrient solution (μM): 800 $NO_3^-$-N, 120 $NH_4^+$-N, 650 Ca, 100 Mg, 300 K, 550
80 $SO_4^{2-}$-S, 140 Cl, 10 P, 10 Fe (supplied as Fe(III)CDTA), 3.0 B, 1.0 Mn, 0.05 Cu, 0.01 Zn, and 0.02 Mo.
81 Solution pH was not adjusted but averaged pH 6.1. After a further 3 d, four seedlings were transferred to
82 four replications of 11 L solutions (as above) containing no added Zn (control) or with Zn added as either
83 ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ to achieve a final concentration of 25 mg Zn $L^{-1}$ (38.2 μM). This Zn concentration has
84 been shown to reduce root growth by approximately 70% [17] and is within the range found in soil
85 solutions.[18] Solutions were continuously aerated and renewed every 4 d, with plants harvested after 4
86 weeks. At harvest, the roots were washed with flowing deionized water for ca. 1 min and blotted dry with
87 filter paper, before the roots, stems, and leaves were separated. Subsamples of each tissue were immersed
88 in liquid nitrogen and immediately stored in a dry shipper cooled with liquid nitrogen for later analysis
89 using X-ray absorption spectroscopy (XAS). The remaining tissues were oven-dried for analysis using
90 inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) (details provided below).
91
92 *Soil Culture.* An Oxisol (US Soil Taxonomy) with pH 6.7 and a sandy clay texture, collected from a site
93 near Toowoomba, Queensland (Table S1), was air-dried and sieved to < 2 mm. The soil was amended
94 with either ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ with a target concentration of 500 mg Zn $kg^{-1}$ soil as used by Priester et
95 al.[19] This concentration is far in excess of that expected under a fertilisation scenario and could only be
96 conceived to result from an unintentional spill of concentrated ZnO-NP solutions. However, this is the
97 highest concentration used by Priester et al.[19] reporting a negative impact of ENPs on soil fertility and
98 soybean growth. As pointed out by Lombi et al.[20], the above-mentioned article did not include a soluble

Zn treatment and it was therefore not possible to draw any definitive conclusion regarding any nano-specific effects with regard to toxicity. In this article, we provide such comparison which is essential in the context of the debate regarding the environmental consequence of nanotechnologies. To ensure even distribution of Zn in the soil, the ZnO-NP suspensions or $ZnCl_2$ solutions (20 mg Zn $mL^{-1}$) were diluted with deionized water to a volume of 50 mL and sprayed over 2 kg dry soil which was then mixed thoroughly by hand. A control (no added Zn) was also included by spraying with the same volume of deionized water. Each treatment was replicated three times with 2.0 kg soil in each 4 L plastic pot. Soils were watered to 60% of water holding capacity and equilibrated for 1 d prior to planting. Six 3-d old seedlings were transferred to each pot and three seedlings harvested after 4 weeks. The shoots were rinsed with deionized water and separated into stems and leaves. The root system was removed by carefully breaking apart the soil and then rinsing with deionized water for ca. 1 min, blotted dry, and separated into roots and nodules. Samples of each tissue were immersed in liquid nitrogen and stored in a dry shipper for later analysis using XAS. The remaining samples were oven-dried for analysis using ICP-MS. The remaining three plants in each pot were harvested at maturity (ca. 80 d after planting) and samples of seeds ground to fine powder for later analysis using XAS and ICP-MS.

**Soil Incubation Experiment.** The fate of ZnO-NPs following addition to soil was investigated in the Oxisol (described above) and in an Ultisol (US Soil Taxonomy) collected from the Central Highlands of Queensland. This soil is an acidic (pH 5.0) sandy loam soil (Table S1). Two replicates (100 g) of both soils were amended with ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ to a target concentration of 500 mg $kg^{-1}$ soil as described above, placed in 300 mL beakers, and deionized water added to 60% of soil water holding capacity. Each beaker was covered and sealed with plastic film with small holes to maintain relatively constant moisture; deionized water was added every 4 d if necessary. Soils were incubated in the dark at 25 ± 2°C, and samples collected after 1 h, 1 d, 5 d, and 15 d, immediately frozen (ca. -20°C), and later freeze-dried for analysis using XAS.

125 **Bulk XAS.** Zinc $K_\alpha$-edge X-ray absorption near edge structure (XANES) and extended X-ray absorption
126 fine structure (EXAFS) spectra were collected at the XAS Beamline at the Australian Synchrotron,
127 Melbourne as described by Kopittke et al.[21] The energy of each spectrum was calibrated by simultaneous
128 measurement in transmission mode of a metallic Zn foil reference ($K_\alpha$-edge at 9,659 eV). The spectra
129 were collected in fluorescence mode with a 100-element solid-state Ge detector. To prepare samples, ca.
130 1-2 g frozen plant tissues were homogenized in an agate mortar and pestle continuously cooled with
131 liquid nitrogen.[17] Soil and seed samples were ground using a mortar and pestle and sieved to < 250 µm
132 using a stainless steel sieve. A total of 29 Zn standards was also examined, including six aqueous
133 compounds [21] and 23 finely ground powder spectra [13]. The aqueous standards were used for fitting Zn
134 ligands in plant tissues and the solid standards for Zn ligands in soils. Due to the low concentration of Zn
135 in some fresh plant samples, only XANES spectra were collected for plant samples, while both XANES
136 and EXAFS spectra were collected for soil samples. The spectra (average of three scans) were energy
137 normalized using Athena software.[22] Principal component analysis (PCA) of the normalized sample
138 spectra was used to estimate the likely number of species contained in the samples, while target
139 transformation (TT) was used to identify relevant standards for linear combination fitting (LCF) of the
140 sample spectra.[23] PCA and TT were undertaken using SixPack.[24] For both XANES (-20 to +30 E, eV) and
141 EXAFS (2.5 to 9 k, $Å^{-1}$), LCF was performed using Athena.
142
143 **X-ray Fluorescence Microscopy (µ-XRF).** Elemental µ-XRF maps were collected at the XFM Beamline
144 at the Australian Synchrotron [25] using roots exposed to 25 mg Zn $L^{-1}$ as ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ for 1 d. In
145 addition, mature seeds of plants grown in the Oxisol amended with ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ were
146 longitudinally sliced (ca. 200 µm) for µ-XRF analysis. The XRF spectra were analyzed using GeoPIXE [26]
147 and the images were generated using the Dynamic Analysis method.[27]
148
149 **Digestion and Analysis of Total Zn.** Dry plant tissues were placed into 50 mL conical flasks and
150 digested using 10 mL 5:1 $HNO_3$:$HClO_4$. Following digestion, the samples were diluted to 10 mL using
151 deionized water before analysis by ICP-MS. Soil samples were digested with aqua regia (1:3 HCl:$HNO_3$)

and analyzed for total Zn by ICP-MS. Quality control measures included the use of procedural blanks and repeat analysis of a certified reference.

**Statistical Analysis.** Treatment-differences were tested for significance ($p < 0.05$) using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed with IBM SPSS Statistics 20.

## RESULTS

**ZnO-NPs and Soluble Zn Effects on Plants.** In solution culture, the addition of Zn reduced plant growth compared to that in the control (basal nutrient solution), with toxicity more severe in $ZnCl_2$ solutions than with those containing ZnO-NPs (Table S2). In contrast, there were no significant effects ($p > 0.05$) on plant growth between the control and the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments in soil culture.

After 4 weeks in solution culture, Zn concentration in roots exposed to ZnO-NPs (44,700 μg $g^{-1}$ dry mass, DM) was 4.6-times higher than those exposed to $ZnCl_2$ (9,650 μg $g^{-1}$ DM). Concentrations in stems (487 and 584 μg $g^{-1}$ DM) and leaves (119 and 139 μg $g^{-1}$ DM) were similar between the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments (Table S3). As a consequence, the Zn transfer coefficient (i.e. the ratio of Zn in the leaf relative to the root) was 4.7-times lower in the ZnO-NP treatment (0.003) compared to that in the $ZnCl_2$ treatment (0.014). This similarity indicated that the increased accumulation of Zn in roots exposed to ZnO-NPs in solution culture is likely due to either an increased adhesion or limited transport of ZnO-NPs to the shoot. In the case of soil culture, there were no significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in Zn concentrations of roots (1,003 and 1,180 μg $g^{-1}$ DM), stems (108 and 118 μg $g^{-1}$ DM), leaves (155 and 181 μg $g^{-1}$ DM), or seeds (43.3 and 55.7 μg $g^{-1}$ DM) between the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments (Table S3). Transfer coefficients in soil culture (0.155 and 0.154) were substantially higher than those in solution culture.

**Zinc Speciation and Distribution in Plant Tissues.** The Zn XANES spectrum for ZnO-NPs (Figure 1) is readily identified due to its unique features, particularly the shoulder at 9,780 eV, and is similar to

179 previously-reported spectra for this material.[13, 14] The Zn XANES spectra for all other standards, while
180 different from each other, were substantially different from that of ZnO-NPs.
181
182 Overall, it was apparent that the XANES spectra of roots exposed to ZnO-NPs in solution culture were
183 markedly different from that obtained for the $ZnCl_2$-exposed roots, with the spectrum for ZnO-NP-
184 exposed roots resembling that of the ZnO-NPs themselves (Figure 1A). It would appear that ZnO-NPs
185 were the primary form of Zn in these samples – this being supported by the distribution of Zn using μ-
186 XRF. Zinc was largely located on the root surface, most likely due to the adhesion and aggregation of
187 ZnO-NPs (Figure 2A). Indeed, LCF revealed that ca. 65% of the Zn in these ZnO-NP-exposed roots was
188 present as ZnO-NPs, with 32% associated with histidine (Table 1). In contrast, roots exposed to $ZnCl_2$ in
189 solution culture accumulated Zn in the root apex (i.e. meristematic zone) (Figure 2A). This Zn was found
190 to be associated with histidine (49%) and polygalacturonic acid (Zn-PGA, 32%), and Zn-phosphate (19%).
191
192 Interestingly, and in contrast to the solution culture results, the XANES spectra of roots grown in soil
193 were similar regardless of whether the roots were exposed ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ (Figure 1B). Using LCF,
194 the Zn in roots from these ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments was found to be associated with citrate (average
195 51%), histidine (28%), and phytate (20%) (Table 1). Given the similar concentration of Zn in roots
196 exposed to ZnO-NPs and $ZnCl_2$ (Table S3), it is possible that the ZnO-NPs underwent dissolution in the
197 soil.
198
199 The XANES spectra obtained for the stems and leaves from the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments in both
200 solution and soil culture were visually similar to the spectrum of Zn citrate (Figure 1). This observation
201 was confirmed by LCF, with the Zn in these tissues mainly associated with citrate (50%), histidine (26%),
202 and phytate (24%) (Table 1). In the root nodules, Zn was associated with citrate (37%), phytate (38%),
203 and cysteine (27%) (Table 1).
204

The XANES spectra for seeds of plants grown in the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments in soil showed a characteristic broader double-peaked feature, which resembled the Zn phytate spectrum in some regards (Figure 1B). However, the best fits using LCF included association with three components, histidine (50%), cysteine (30%) and phosphate (20%) (Table 1). Even if Zn phytate was included as one of the standards in the LCF, only 16-33% was calculated to be presented as Zn phytate, with the remainder of Zn present associated with cysteine (40-47%) and histidine (26-37%) (the R-factors increasing by 50 to 100% compared to the best fits). Therefore, ca. 70 to 80% of the Zn in the seeds was associated with amino acids (i.e. histidine and cysteine), with 20 to 30% bound to phosphate such as $Zn_3(PO_4)_2$ or as Zn phytate. The spatial distribution of Zn within the seeds determined using μ-XRF was found to be similar in the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments. A high concentration of Zn was evident in the outer layer of cotyledon and the hypocotyl, with low Zn concentration in the seed coat (testa) and the inner cotyledon (Figure 2B).

**Zinc Speciation in Soils.**

Across the incubation periods examined, both XANES and EXAFS spectra were similar regardless of whether the soils were amended with $ZnCl_2$ or ZnO-NPs (Figure 3 and Table 2), indicating a rapid dissolution of the ZnO-NPs and that incubation for up to 15 d did not substantially change the speciation of Zn in either soil. In the Oxisol with $ZnCl_2$, LCF using the XANES spectra indicated that the Zn was present as Zn sorbed ferrihydrite (54%), ZnAl-layered double hydroxide (ZnAl-LDH) (22%), and $ZnSO_4$ (23%). In the case of the Ultisol, 35% of the Zn was calculated to be in a form resembling hopeite ($Zn_3(PO_4)_2$), with Zn also present as ZnAl-LDH (14%), Zn-humic acid (21%), and $ZnSO_4$ (30%) (Figure 3 and Table 2). These results regarding the presence of ZnAl-LDH and $ZnSO_4$ were reinforced by analysis of the EXAFS spectra (Table 2). Indeed, for both soils, LCF of the EXAFS spectra indicated that the Zn was present as 43% of hemimorphite ($Zn_4Si_2O_7(OH)_2{\cdot}H_2O$), 29% as ZnAl-LDH, and 28% as $ZnSO_4$ (Table 2). The slight discrepancy between XANES and EXAFS LCF results has been reported previously[28, 29] and could be related to the lower sensitivity of EXAFS to metals bound to matrices composed of light elements or organic matter.[28]

232

233 Even when ZnO-NPs were added into the soil, almost all of the Zn was present in the same forms as when
234 $ZnCl_2$ was added (Figure 3 and Table 2). The LCF of the XANES spectra for both soils revealed that no
235 Zn could be detected in the form of ZnO-NPs after 1 h incubation. These results suggest that the large
236 majority of the added ZnO-NPs underwent rapid dissolution following their entry into the soils. It should
237 be noted, however, that changes in Zn speciation may have occurred during the time between the samples
238 being transferred to −20 °C and their freezing.

239

240 **DISCUSSION**

241 In solution culture, soluble Zn ($ZnCl_2$) was more toxic than ZnO-NPs to the growth of cowpea (Table S2)
242 despite the apparent accumulation of ZnO-NPs on the root surface (Figure 2 and Table S3). Interestingly,
243 however, when grown in soil, there was no difference in plant growth between the $ZnCl_2$ and ZnO-NP
244 treatments (Table S2). This difference between solution and soil culture highlights the importance of the
245 growth matrix in plant culture experiments. Importantly, it was noted that there was also no significant
246 difference in Zn concentration in shoots between the $ZnCl_2$ and ZnO-NPs treatments (Table S3) and we
247 did not detected the upward translocation of ZnO-NPs from roots to shoots of plants grown in either
248 solution or soil culture (Table 1 and Figure 1). Under the current experimental conditions, the ZnO-NPs
249 added to the soil were rapidly converted to the same forms as when $ZnCl_2$ was added (Figure 3 and Table
250 2). This indicates that even at the high rate of ZnO-NPs added in the current study, no nano-specific
251 effects (toxicity, uptake, speciation, and distribution) could be observed when plants were grown in soils.
252 Thus, whilst Priester et al.[19] reported that the use of ZnO-NPs may result in "agriculturally associated
253 human and environmental risks", our data suggest that these risks for ZnO-NPs, under the current
254 experimental conditions, would not different from those of soluble Zn. It is noteworthy that Priester et
255 al.[19] did not include a soluble Zn control in their study.

256

257 In solution culture, accumulation of Zn in roots exposed to ZnO-NPs was 4.6-times higher than that in the
258 $ZnCl_2$ treatment, but toxicity was more severe in solutions with $ZnCl_2$ (Tables S2 and S3). The majority

259 of the Zn in roots exposed to ZnO-NPs was on the root surface due to their adhesion and aggregation
260 (Figure 2A). Indeed, the XAS analyses indicated that ca. 65% of Zn in these roots was present as ZnO-
261 NPs (Table 1 and Figure 1). In addition, the speciation of Zn was similar in the shoots for both $ZnCl_2$ and
262 ZnO-NP treatments and no ZnO-NPs were detected in shoot tissues despite the substantial accumulation
263 of ZnO-NPs on the root surface (Table 1 and Figure 1). These observations indicate that the Zn uptake
264 and toxicity was due to particle dissolution in the bulk nutrient solution and particle adhesion onto the
265 root surface, rather than the uptake of nanoparticles. These findings are in accordance with previous
266 reports[12, 30-32] which concluded that the toxicity of ZnO-NPs is due solely to solubilized $Zn^{2+}$.
267
268 In soil culture, there was no significant difference in plant growth or uptake of Zn between the two Zn
269 treatments (Table S2 and S3). There was rapid equilibration through adsorption and precipitation
270 reactions upon addition of soluble $ZnCl_2$ or ZnO-NPs to soil. This could be seen by the presence of ZnAl-
271 LDH, hopeite, and hemimorphite (Table 2), the formation of which substantially reduced the toxicity of
272 Zn to the plants. In addition, the phytotoxicity of Zn in soils depends on a range of soil properties
273 (including pH and cation exchange capacity [CEC]). Indeed, Smolders et al.[33] reported that the EC10
274 (10% effective concentration) values for *Triticum aestivum* grown in a range of soils varied from 9 to
275 1,231 mg $kg^{-1}$ (cf. 500 mg $kg^{-1}$ used in pot experiment with a pH-neutral soil). The application of ZnO-
276 NPs to the Oxisol (pH-neutral) and Ultisol (acidic) had similar effects to that of $ZnCl_2$ with no ZnO-NPs
277 detected after incubating for 1 h (Table 2 and Figure 3). This finding suggests a rapid dissolution of ZnO-
278 NPs in these soils, most likely driven by sorption of solubilized $Zn^{2+}$ found in previous studies.[13, 14, 34-36]
279 For example, Lombi et al.[13] found that ZnO-NPs in sewage sludge were converted to ZnS within 1 d.
280 Similarly, Scheckel et al.[14] found that the addition of a clay mineral (kaolinite) resulted in the dissolution
281 of ZnO-NPs within 1 d due to their sorption to the negative charge of the clay (78% of the ZnO-NPs
282 sorbed within 1 h). Given that kaolinite has a similar (or lower) CEC (ca. 1-5 $cmol_c$/kg) relative to the
283 soils used in the present study (2.3 or 13 $cmol_c$/kg, see Table S1), the observation that the ZnO-NPs
284 underwent rapid dissolution upon their addition to the soils is in accordance with previous findings.
285 However, it seems that the speed of dissolution of ZnO-NPs depends upon soil properties (particularly pH)

286 and the method used to add ZnO-NPs to the soil. For example, in contrast to the present study where
287 ZnO-NPs could not be detected after 1 h in acidic soils, Collins et al.[36] found that dissolution of the ZnO-
288 NPs required 30 d after sprinkling nanoparticles on the surface of an alkaline soil (pH 7.5). Similarly,
289 using flow field-flow fractionation, Gimbert et al.[37] was still able to detect ZnO-NPs in suspensions of an
290 alkaline soil (pH 9.0) spiked with 12,000 mg Zn $kg^{-1}$ after 14 d incubation.
291
292 In the present study, no ZnO-NPs were detected in any shoot tissues regardless of growth matrix (Table 1
293 and Figure 1), indicating no transfer of ZnO-NPs from roots to shoots. This finding is in keeping with
294 recent studies in which no ZnO-NPs could be detected in shoots of soil-grown soybean using XAS; rather,
295 Zn was associated with citrate in the stem and seed pod[10]. Additionally, Zn phosphate was present in the
296 shoots of wheat grown with added ZnO-NPs in sand culture.[9]
297
298 In roots exposed to $ZnCl_2$ in solution culture, the majority of the Zn was observed in the meristemic
299 region (Figure 2A) and LCF analysis indicated that the Zn was primarily associated with histidine, with
300 slightly smaller contributions from polygalacturonic acid (the main component of pectin in the cell wall)
301 and precipitated as Zn-phosphate (Table 1). This suggests that histidine and the cell wall play important
302 roles in Zn homeostasis and detoxification in roots. Similarly, Salt et al.[38] reported that the majority of the
303 intracellular Zn in roots of *Thlaspi caerulescens*, a Zn hyperaccumulator, grown in solution culture was
304 coordinated with histidine, with the remainder complexed to the cell wall. In the present study, however,
305 no Zn was found to be present as Zn-phosphate within roots when grown in soil culture, but rather was
306 associated with citrate, histidine, and phytate (Table 1). Zinc-phosphate precipitates have been observed
307 at the surface of roots grown in solution culture[39, 40], being most likely related to the low transfer
308 coefficients of Zn from root to shoot (Table S3). This is consistent with the observations by Sarret et al.[41]
309 with Zn in *Arabidopsis halleri* grown in solution culture.
310
311 Organic acids including citrate, malate, and oxalate are primarily located in the vacuoles[42] and are often
312 found to chelate Zn in leaves [43] and as found by Salt et al.[38] with citrate in shoots of *T. caerulescens*. In

the present study, we found that the chemical forms of Zn were similar in all stem and leaf tissues regardless of Zn-treatments, with Zn mainly bound to citrate, histidine, and phytate (Table 1). It is not possible to exclude the presence of other compounds with carboxyl groups (e.g. malate), but our results support the role of carboxyl groups as important ligands involved in the transport and storage of Zn in shoots.[38, 43]

Surprisingly, there is comparatively little information regarding the speciation of Zn in seeds. The LCF results revealed that ca. 80% of the Zn was coordinated with amino acids such as histidine and cysteine, with a smaller proportion precipitated with phosphate (Table 1). Phytic acid has been found to be the main storage form of P in cereals[44], and that phytate has a high affinity for Zn, Fe, and other trace elements.[45] The co-localization of phytate with these elements[46] seems to support the hypothesis that phytate plays an important role in the storage of Zn in the seeds or grains. However, LCF results in the present study (Table 1) showed that Zn was predominantly associated with amino acids (histidine and cysteine). Indeed, the importance of amino acids (c.f. phytate) for Zn storage has been reported previously in barley (*Hordeum vulgare* L.) grain. For example, Persson et al.[47] incubated barley grain with phytase which degrades phytate, a treatment that doubled the extraction efficiency of P but have no effect on that of Zn. Rather, Zn was found to be bound mainly to peptides as measured using SEC/IP-ICP-MS. Similarly, in a study with low-phytate barley grain mutants, Hatzack et al.[48] found that impaired phytate accumulation did not influence Zn storage capacity in the grains.

Limitations of the XAS techniques employed in this study include uncertainty in species of ca. 5% of the total amount of the target element [49, 50] which may result in the XAS analysis being insufficiently sensitive to identify small amounts of ZnO-NPs in plants and in soils.

In summary, we have not detected the translocation of ZnO-NPs from roots to shoots of plants grown in either solution or soil culture, although there was a substantial quantity of ZnO-NPs on the surface of roots exposed to ZnO-NP in solution culture. Even though large quantities of pristine NPs were applied

directly to the soil with which they were mixed thoroughly, the ZnO-NPs appeared to be completely dissociated after 1 h incubation and transformed in similar manner to the $ZnCl_2$ treatment. Indeed, there was no significant difference between the ZnO-NP and $ZnCl_2$ treatments in plant growth, Zn accumulation, or Zn speciation in plant tissues. We conclude, therefore, that under the current experimental conditions, there were no nano-specific effects on plants grown in soil, and that this finding needs to be considered in environmental risk assessment and management strategies.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

Additional information is available regarding the characteristics of soils used in this study, cowpea biomass, Zn concentration in various plant tissues, results of the PCA analysis, target transformation SPOIL values of reference spectra, and the Fourier Transform of EXAFS spectra for all soil samples. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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**Table 1.** Distributions of Zn species in various tissues of cowpea grown in either solution culture or soil culture[a]

| | Nodule | | Root | | Stem | | Leaf | | Seed | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ZnO-NP | $ZnCl_2$ | ZnO-NP | $ZnCl_2$ | ZnO-NP | $ZnCl_2$ | ZnO-NP | $ZnCl_2$ | ZnO-NP | $ZnCl_2$ |
| Solution culture | | | | | | | | | | |
| ZnO-NPs (%) | | | 65 (1.1) | | | | | | | |
| Zn-PGA (%)[c] | | | | 32 (0.7) | | | | | | |
| Zn-citrate (%) | | | | | 76 (0.6) | 63 (1.0) | 60 (1.2) | 75 (1.0) | | |
| Zn-histidine (%) | | | 32 (0.9) | 49 (1.7) | 14 (1.0) | 17 (1.5) | 25 (1.9) | 10 (1.5) | | |
| Zn-phytate (%) | | | | | 10 (1.2) | 20 (2.0) | 15 (2.4) | 15 (1.9) | | |
| Zn-cysteine (%) | | | | | | | | | | |
| Zn-phosphate (%) | | | 3 (0.7) | 19 (3.0) | | | | | | |
| R-factor[b] | | | 0.0001 | 0.0002 | 0.0001 | 0.0003 | 0.0005 | 0.0003 | | |
| Soil culture | | | | | | | | | | |
| Zn-citrate (%) | 42 (1.5) | 31 (1.2) | 59 (0.8) | 43 (0.8) | 27 (1.1) | 34 (1.9) | 50 (0.9) | 41 (0.7) | | |
| Zn-histidine (%) | | | 25 (1.2) | 30 (1.2) | 38 (1.6) | 34 (2.9) | 43 (1.4) | 27 (1.1) | 56 (1.3) | 45 (1.4) |
| Zn-phytate (%) | 38 (2.1) | 37 (1.4) | 16 (1.4) | 27 (1.5) | 35 (2.1) | 32 (3.6) | 7 (1.8) | 32 (1.4) | | |
| Zn-cysteine (%) | 22 (0.9) | 32 (0.7) | | | | | | | 24 (1.1) | 36 (1.1) |
| Zn-phosphate (%) | | | | | | | | | 20 (1.7) | 19 (1.8) |
| R-factor[b] | 0.0006 | 0.0003 | 0.0002 | 0.0002 | 0.0004 | 0.0005 | 0.0003 | 0.0002 | 0.0003 | 0.0004 |

[a]Data are presented as percentages and the values in brackets show the percentage variation in the calculated values. [b]R factor = $\sum(\text{experimental} - \text{fit})^2 / \sum(\text{experimental})^2$, where the sums are over the data points in the fitting region. [c]PGA: polygalacturonic acid.

**Table 2.** Best fit speciation of Zn in soils as identified by linear combination fitting (LCF) of $K_{\alpha}$-edge XANES and EXAFS spectra[a]

| | XANES | | | | | EXAFS | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ZnAl-LDH | Zn-sorb ferr.[c] | | $ZnSO_4$ | R-factor[b] | ZnAl-LDH | hemimorphite | $ZnSO_4$ | R-factor[b] |
| Oxisol | | | | | | | | | |
| ZnO-NPs 1h | 30 (1.0) | 45 (0.6) | | 25 (1.2) | 0.0003 | 38 (5.2) | 44 (1.6) | 18 (5.5) | 0.057 |
| ZnO-NPs 1d | 24 (1.1) | 44 (0.6) | | 32 (1.2) | 0.0003 | 26 (5.4) | 48 (1.6) | 26 (5.6) | 0.063 |
| ZnO-NPs 5d | 28 (1.1) | 41 (0.6) | | 31 (1.3) | 0.0004 | 36 (5.1) | 41 (1.5) | 23 (5.3) | 0.057 |
| ZnO-NPs 15d | 24 (1.2) | 43 (0.7) | | 33 (1.4) | 0.0004 | 27 (5.4) | 45 (1.7) | 28 (5.7) | 0.066 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 1 h | 23 (1.5) | 55 (0.8) | | 22 (1.7) | 0.0007 | 24 (5.5) | 47 (1.7) | 29 (5.7) | 0.081 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 1 d | 22 (1.4) | 53 (0.8) | | 25 (1.6) | 0.0005 | 29 (5.7) | 47 (1.7) | 24 (5.9) | 0.082 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 5 d | 21 (1.6) | 55 (0.9) | | 24 (1.8) | 0.0004 | 22 (6.9) | 53 (2.1) | 25 (7.2) | 0.096 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 15 d | 22 (1.4) | 54 (0.8) | | 24 (1.6) | 0.0006 | 22 (5.9) | 45 (1.8) | 33 (6.1) | 0.088 |
| | ZnAl-LDH | HA-Zn | hopeite | $ZnSO_4$ | | | | | |
| Ultisol | | | | | | | | | |
| ZnO-NPs 1h | 15 (0.7) | 29 (1.8) | 17 (1.4) | 40 (2.3) | 0.0001 | 31 (6.5) | 36 (2.0) | 33 (6.7) | 0.079 |
| ZnO-NPs 1d | 16 (0.8) | 27 (1.8) | 16 (1.4) | 41 (2.4) | 0.0001 | 31 (6.3) | 35 (1.9) | 34 (6.6) | 0.076 |
| ZnO-NPs 5d | 12 (0.9) | 27 (2.2) | 15 (1.7) | 46 (2.9) | 0.0002 | 36 (5.1) | 41 (1.5) | 23 (5.3) | 0.058 |
| ZnO-NPs 15d | 9 (0.9) | 28 (2.2) | 15 (1.7) | 49 (2.9) | 0.0002 | 27 (5.4) | 45 (1.7) | 28 (5.7) | 0.066 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 1 h | 10 (0.9) | 21 (2.1) | 19 (1.7) | 50 (2.9) | 0.0002 | 26 (7.5) | 32 (2.3) | 42 (7.8) | 0.097 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 1 d | 13 (1.1) | 10 (0.8) | 26 (2.0) | 51 (3.5) | 0.0002 | 18 (6.5) | 35 (2.0) | 47 (6.8) | 0.080 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 5 d | 16 (1.1) | 24 (2.4) | 50 (1.9) | 10 (3.3) | 0.0002 | 34 (7.2) | 46 (2.2) | 20 (7.6) | 0.109 |
| $ZnCl_2$ 15 d | 16 (1.2) | 27 (2.6) | 47 (2.0) | 10 (3.5) | 0.0003 | 32 (8.4) | 45 (2.6) | 23 (8.8) | 0.140 |

[a]Data are presented as percentages and the values in brackets show the percentage variation in the calculated values. [b]R factor = $\sum(\text{experimental} - \text{fit})^2 / \sum(\text{experimental})^2$, where the sums are over the data points in the fitting region. [c]Zn sorbed ferrihydrite.

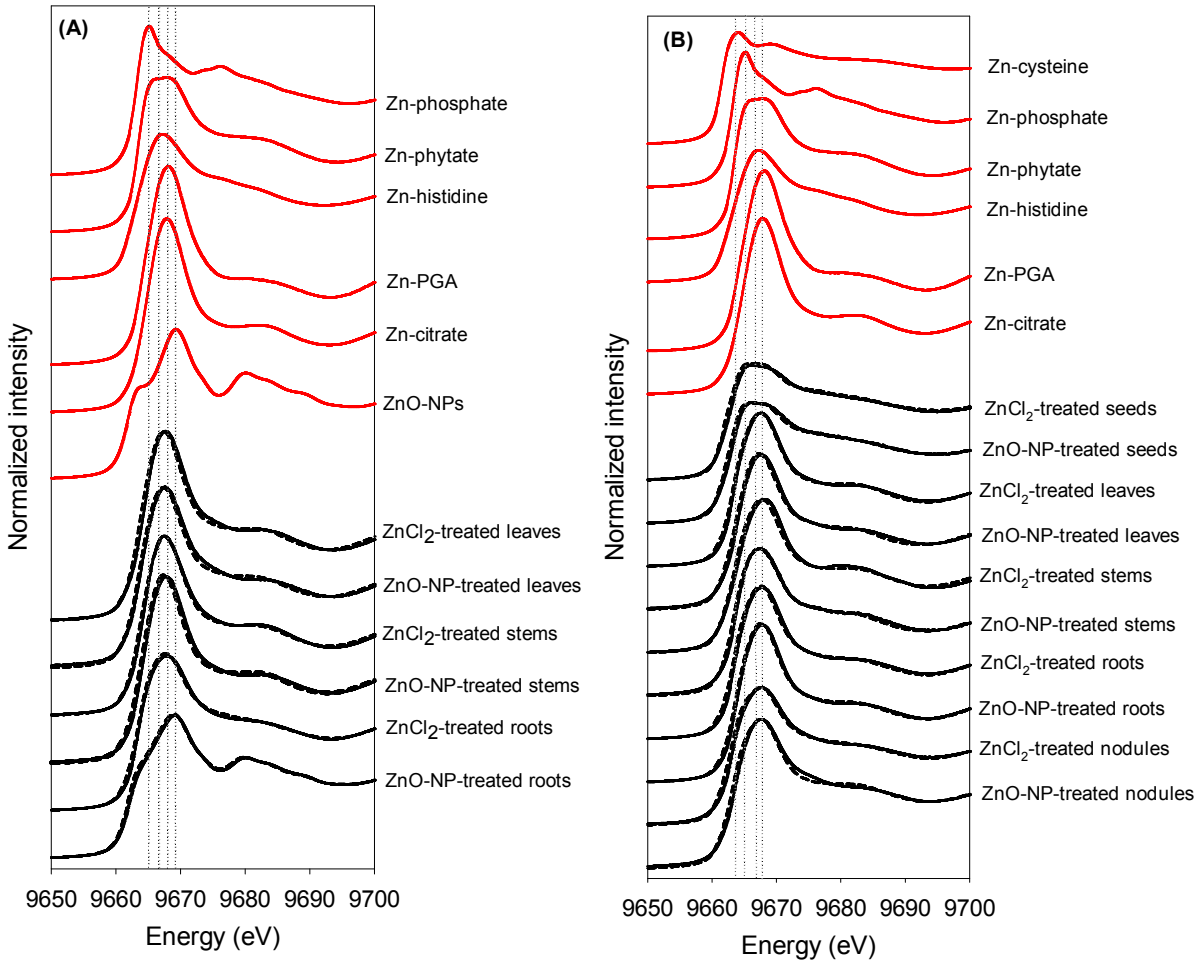



**Figure 1.** Normalized Zn $K_{\alpha}$-edge XANES spectra for various tissues of cowpea exposed to ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ in solution culture (A) or soil culture (B). Data are also presented for the standard compounds determined in the LCF solutions. Dotted lines show the best fits of reference spectra obtained using LCF as presented in Table 1.

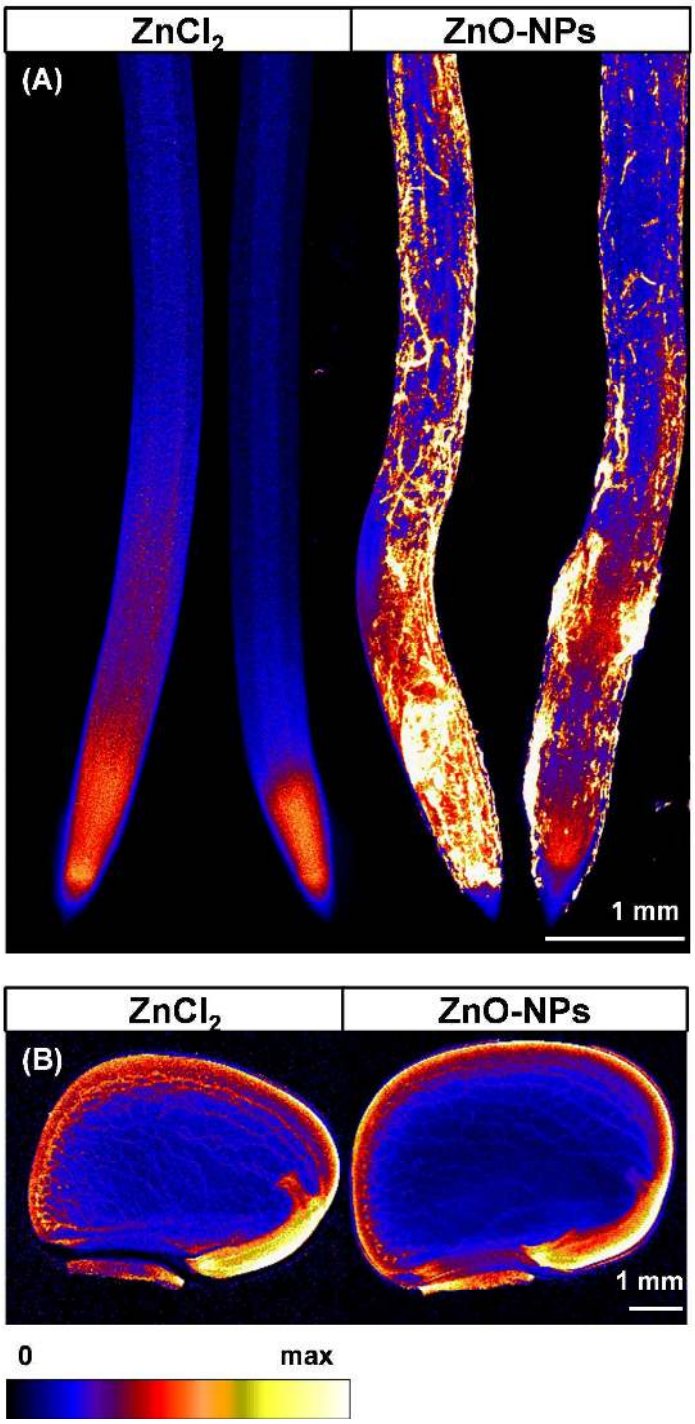



**Figure 2.** (A) Imaging of Zn in cowpea roots exposed for 1 d to 25 mg Zn $L^{-1}$ as ZnO-NPs or $ZnCl_2$ in solution culture using μ-XRF. (B) Imaging of Zn in cowpea seeds grown in the Oxisol amended with $ZnCl_2$ or ZnO-NPs using μ-XRF. All samples were enclosed in 4 μm-thick Ultralene films and scanned simultaneously allowing valid comparisons between treatments. Brighter colors correspond to higher Zn concentrations.

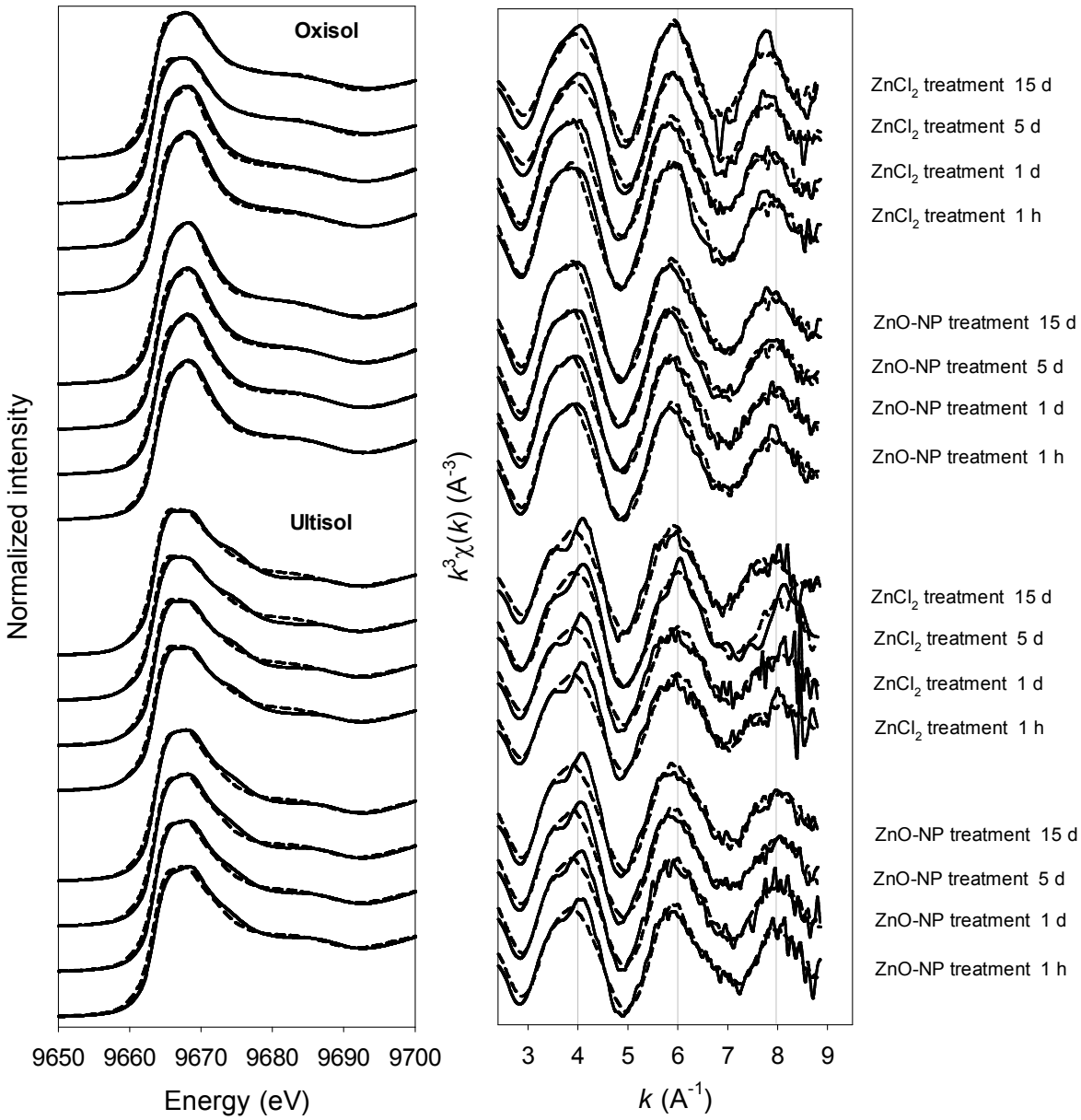
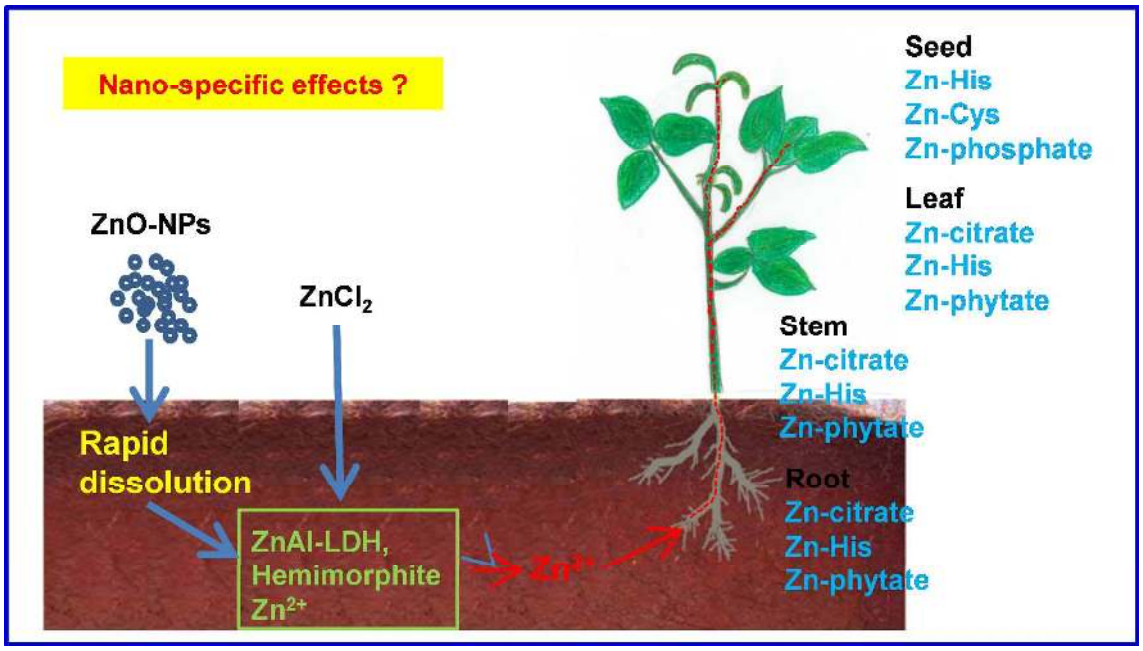



**Figure 3.** Zn $K_\alpha$-edge XANES and $k^3$-weighted EXAFS spectra of two soils (Oxisol and Ultisol) amended with 500 mg Zn kg$^{-1}$ as $ZnCl_2$ or ZnO-NPs incubated for 1 h, 1 d, 5 d, and 15 d. Dotted lines show the best fits of reference spectra obtained using LCF as presented in Table 2.




**TOC Graphic Image**