

Seeds in Africa, future of farmer seed system at risk?

A raft of changes occasioned by global interventions in African countries has taken the control of seeds from the African farmer into the hands of commercial seed conglomerates leaving the farmer likely to become very dependent on others for his seeds, a dangerous move, contends ***Isaac Winful Dadzie**.



Seeds and seed system in Africa have seen changes at the macroeconomic management level from previously state-led green revolution in the 1960s to an alliance of green revolution guided by neoliberal policies within the framework of a network of civil societies, commercial private breeders, farmers, state regulators and research institutions.

The result? A sea of change in seed policy in a number of countries on the

continent. However, this has not led to the promulgation of requisite laws to regulate the situation in most African countries. For example, whereas Ghana and South Africa have enacted laws to cover transgenic seeds production, importation, export and marketing, Liberia is yet to pass new bill for seed production and distribution and has no law on plant variety protection yet. Also disturbing in this transition to the new policy nar-

rative of green revolution is the fact that many public breeding institutions have lost space to corporate breeding organizations on the continent and this is happening at a time when expansion of seed production requires the need and struggle for genetic resources.

The weakness in the seed system in Africa is the difficulty of harmonising farm seed systems into formal seed production and distribution. According

In Ghana, public companies like the Ghana Seed Company which produced certified seeds were closed down and put on privatisation in 1989 due to poor performance in a macro environment not supportive of a parastatal development. The Ghana Grains and Legume Board (GGLB) which was tasked to produce foundation seeds during this same period of structural adjustment converted employed seed growers into private growers. According to Prof Kojo Amanor of the Institute of African Studies (University of Ghana), donor support for seed production during the structural adjustment period was reluctantly given in the context of creating a viable commercial company, which could then be privatised.

to a 2019 report by the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) on production quality control in farmer seed systems, the formal seed system, which is largely shaped by the neo-liberal alliance of food governance framework, provides a minority of what farmers need since they are developed at a distance from farmers and do not always adapt well into specific production contexts. The neo-liberal paradigm in formal seed system is yet to fully appreciate the role of small holder farmers especially in appreciating the central role of farmers in biodiversity and conservation. This role is said to underpin farmers' right. However, this same role in a wider ecological system is not in good health because since the rise of industrial agriculture there has been a greater loss of biodiversity constituting the sixth major extinction event in the history of the life of the earth with dramatic erosion of genetic materials in industrialised capitalist and peripheral countries.

It is important to mention that in the context of seed systems in Africa farmers have a range of diverse practices for ensuring that seed quality is retained over time, says ACB. Nevertheless, they've identified that farmer seed system is not perfect on the continent. For instance, "quality controls in smallholder seed production systems are unevenly practised, drought and other difficult production conditions may limit reproduction and maintenance of quality seed, and there are intense pressures on farmers to abandon their diverse crops and varieties in favour of a smaller number

from the formal sector that offer potential for cash generation."

An ensuing debate over promotion of farm saved seeds is whether farmers should register their seeds? ACB argues that "in the existing formal framework, if farmers plan to register their seeds, they will need to fix the characteristics into a defined variety. Registration can open farmer seed to commercial exploitation with uneven allocation of benefits and costs, especially when there are no Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) or Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) arrangements. But there are reasons why farmers may want to register their seeds in the context of formal seed laws that require registration. For instance, African farmers would want an open space for public support. They would also want to prevent biopiracy through defensive publication of varieties and would want to commercialise.

Another central debate is also how seed laws give space to farmer seed system. It is widely studied that the emerging seed laws in Africa enable intellectual property rights protection for commercial breeders. In Ghana, there is a standstill to a bill in parliament for addressing plant variety protection of breeders and this is due to pressures from CSOs and the public. CSOs such as Food Sovereignty Ghana and Peasants Farmers Association of Ghana have raised questions about the extent of rights given to breeders and the sovereign protection given to them in times of state emergency and how that magnitude of rights may affect traditional methods of breeding.

Another dimension raised by food sovereignty movements in Africa is that a severe weakness of farmer system makes seeds from it enter into commercial sale even as they ought to meet the requirements in formal seed laws designed for commercial breeding and production. This raises the vital question of whether there should be any special dispensation or flexibility even after smallholder farmers have gone past the commercial threshold in seed production.

Since most laws and regulations are not well suited to farmer seed populations in all respects because these seeds require uniformity and stability, the growth of formal seed production and distribution has gained interest and momentum on the continent. The growth occurs yet within a climate where most small holder farmers, contributing nearly 80% of total food crop seeds, maintain their use and exchange of saved seeds. In an interview by the Council for Agriculture Research and Development (CORAF) with Stephen Yacouba Atar, the CEO of Nigeria's oldest seed company, Da-Allgreen Seeds Limited, he narrates that when CORAF and its partners USAID, and other political and civil society actors set out to level the playing field in matters of seed certification, varietal release, phytosanitary control in West and Central Africa, it led to fast delivery of seed products to targeted farmers in the region. In the past five years, the West African Seed Program has ensured harmonization of national seed rules and has contributed to a considerable improvement in the availability of certified seeds to farmers and enabling countries to adopt legislation to allow cross-border trade.

Nigeria has seen significant growth in certified seed production and export in West Africa. According to Dr Philip Ojo, Director General National Agriculture Seeds Council of Nigeria, "overall, Nigeria now accounts for 60 percent of the total seeds marketed in West Africa". In 2018 alone, it was reported by Seed Entrepreneurs Association of Nigeria (SEEDAN) that Nigerian companies exported close to 1,200 metric tons of certified seeds to Ghana. These seeds included 830 metric tons of maize, 340 metric

tons of soybeans, and 30 metric tons of sorghum. Both The Gambia and Sierra Leone imported about 450 metric tons of certified rice seeds from Nigeria in the same 2018. These volumes of seed, where until recently, not manifesting due to incoherent rules and lack of opportunities inhibiting the seed business beyond borders. CORAF played a significant role in this development for the certified seed market in West Africa by opening up new opportunities for the Nigeria Seed industry in measures such as providing foundation seeds to efficient companies and helping them in their organisation.

As earlier stated, it is worthy to reiterate that most seeds used by smallholder farmers on the African continent are reproduced by farmers themselves outside any formal processes of control. But inadequate formal attention to informal seed systems has led to low dispersal of farmers preferred crop varieties. Effort is being made by organisations like the Integrated Sector Seed Development (ISSD) Africa in parts of the continent like in Ethiopia to strengthen farmer seed system with emphasis on quality control. Some of these initiatives have become possible after assessment on the impact of seed laws on small holder farmers on the continent.

Although several African countries have commitment to protocols and policies on agriculture, many of them have also made commitments to trade, intellectual property, economic development, climate change, etc, agreements through bilateral, regional and international arrangements which explicitly do not give consideration to the different seed systems on the continent and how these systems impact farmers' access to quality seeds. Lack of such consideration has created challenges such as poor representation of small holder interest in seed laws. For instance, there is poor understanding of the importance, bias of seed laws towards major crops, poor representation of farmers in seed laws and regulation formulation and absence of review on seed laws. There is also little opportunity for registration of farmer seeds, feasible quality assurance of farmer seeds is poorly understood, and critically most seed laws on the continent criminalise farmer

MALAWI BRIEF

With an estimated area of 11 million Ha, where 56% of the land is cultivable, Malawi just like all African countries has informal and formal seed systems. Smallholder farmers constitute about 2 million and are mainly subsistence growers. Sources of seed in the informal sector are largely from farm saved seed, farmer to farmer exchange, local markets, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs).

The informal sources of seed are used by the farmer often because improved seed is not available or the farmer does not understand the benefits of improved seed and sometimes because of traditional and cultural values, high prices and preferences attached to particular seed types. The formal seed system is comprised of local and multinational seed companies most of which have their own breeding, production and distribution programmes. The Seed Act being used now in Malawi was enacted in 1996. The seed laws were introduced to protect the farmer from unscrupulous traders who may sell low quality seed. The aim of the seed laws is to ensure that there is high quality seed available in order to ensure food security of the country. Farmers cannot sell saved seed on the seed market. However, Farmers are able to use and share their seed as crop. The seed laws permit any one, including smallholder farmers to produce certified seed.

seed practices like seed multiplication, selling and exchange.

The future of the seed industry in Africa is set to achieve some sort of harmonisation of farmer seed system and formal seed system. To a large extent,

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the aggressive capitalistic effort to ensure formal dominance of farmer seed system has been of concern to many on the continent. But how can farmer seed system be saved and made to survive with changes that can enhance and promote the farmers right to access and control

of genetic materials? African Governments must lead in formulating seed policies and laws that provide legal space and support for farmer seed systems. In addition, stakeholders also need to create awareness on the importance, roles, and interests of smallholder farmers and provide support for stronger representation of smallholder farmers in seed law development. There is need for explicit consideration for farmer-based seed systems in seed law reviews as well as regular review of the seed law which should be captured in the law through a special provision.

Measures such as deepening understanding of functioning alternative quality assurance mechanisms for farmer-based seed systems and pilot institutionalization in willing countries, developing and testing laws and guidelines for registration of farmer-derived varieties, and importantly strengthening farmers' capacities to manage their own diversity should also be encouraged.

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