ADVOCACY MESSAGING HANDBOOK FOR AFRICAN UNION FARMER MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS POLICY DIALOGUES 2025

ABOUT AFSA

The Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA) is a broad alliance of different civil society actors that are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. These include: African farmers' organisations, African NGO networks, specialist African NGOs, consumer movements in Africa, international organisations which support the stance of AFSA, and individuals. Its members represent smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fishers, hunter/gatherers, indigenous peoples, faith-based institutions, and environmentalists from across Africa. It is a network of networks, currently comprising 48 member networks working in 50 African countries.

About this handbook

In August 2025, the African Union's draft Farmer Managed Seed System Policy will open for consultation across Africa in preparation for its adoption in October 2025. This handbook equips stakeholders with clear, evidence-based messages to influence the policy where it falls short or has significant misalignment. These messages offer a united call to action during consultations and are supported by real-world case studies.

The first section **What are Farmer Managed Seed Systems?** defines and describes these systems. The second section, **Advocacy Messaging**, sets out clear calls for amendment or inclusion of elements during consultations, with key talking points and potential objections and responses. The third provides a **Practical Gide to Political Negotiation** and sets out policymakers' key concerns related to FMSS and responses and provides guidance as to using storytelling, media and public platforms to reinforce advocacy messaging.

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
DUS	Distinct, Uniform, Stable
FISP	Farm Input Subsidy Programmes
FMSS	Farmer Managed Seed System
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition
ITPGRFA	International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture
NPGRC	National Plant Genetic Resources Centre
PGS	Participatory Guarantee Systems
PPP	Public-private partnerships
R&D	Research and development
UNDROP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.
UN FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization

1. WHAT ARE FARMER-MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS?

Farmer Managed Seed Systems (FMSS) are community-rooted seed production, selection and distribution systems managed by smallholder farmers using traditional knowledge, practices and local norms. These systems provide more than 80% of the seed used in Africa (for some crops, they provide 100% of seed); women play a key role in breeding, saving, storing and sharing seed.

Key Characteristics

- **FMSS are led by farmers**: They are managed by small-scale farmers, often women, based on generational knowledge and cultural practices.
- FMSS are **biodiverse**, meaning that they maintain diverse crop varieties adapted to local farming contexts and climate conditions.
- FMSS are **localised**, operating through networks of selection, saving, exchange and sharing of seed.
- FMSS are **customary**, embedded in local customs, with strong communal stewardship.
- FMSS are **resilient** promoting crops that are drought-tolerant, pest-resistant and nutritionally diverse.
- FMSS are **knowledge-driven**, relying on farmer innovation, experimentation and peer-to-peer learning.

Strengths of FMSS

- **Seed sovereignty**: Farmers retain control over seed production, use, exchange and sale.
- **Climate resilience**: Locally adapted varieties better withstand changing weather patterns.
- **Low cost**: Reduces dependence on commercial seed markets and external inputs.
- **Food and nutrition security**: Supports diverse diets and stable food systems.
- **Cultural preservation**: Protects traditional agricultural knowledge and farming identities.
- **Ecosystem support**: Contributes to soil health, pollination and biodiversity conservation.

Challenges faced by FMSS

There is a lack of recognition of FMSS and the vital role that they play. They are often excluded from formal seed policies and are unsupported by regulation. They face challenges around:

- **Limited resources:** Poor access to finance, storage facilities and extension services.
- **Corporate competition:** Undermined by multinational seed companies promoting hybrids and genetically modified organisms.
- **Awareness gap:** Many farmers lack access to information on best practices and rights.

Why Do FMSS Matter?

FMSS contribute significantly to food security and climate resilience. They generate the following benefits in particular:

- **Seed and food security**: Diverse seed banks buffer against crop failure and ensure planting material is available.
- **Climate resilience**: Indigenous and localised varieties withstand drought, heat and pests more reliably than commercial seeds.
- **Environmental benefits**: Biodiversity preservation, soil health and ecosystem resilience through crop variety diversity.
- **Social and cultural benefits**: Reinforcement of community cohesion, traditional knowledge, and women's leadership in seed systems.

Agroecological farmer managed seed systems are the de facto seed providers, breeders and innovators of Africa.

2. ADVOCACY MESSAGING

The African Union's (AU) draft FMSS policy acknowledges the critical role of FMSS in food security, climate adaptation and inclusive development. Aligned with Agenda 2063 and the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), the draft policy promotes investment, legal recognition and farmer participation to ensure FMSS remain central to Africa's seed and food sovereignty. There are, however, some weaknesses and gaps in the AU's draft policy. Technical experts reviewed the draft and accompanying strategy and made the following 5 key recommendations:

- The policy must be anchored in agroecological values and principles.
- The policy must establish a sui generis regulatory regime for FMSS.
- The policy must explicitly set mechanisms in place to avoid corporate capture of FMSS.
- The policy must set out inclusive funding mechanisms and pathways for FMSS.
- The policy must explicitly note that FMSS are guardians and multipliers of biodiversity.

This section of the handbook sets out the rationale for these recommendations, provides detail on the advocacy messages and outlines some common objections likely to be made by policymakers, government officials, technical advisors and promoters of 'formal' seed. It provides responses to these objections.

Message 1: Anchor the FMSS Policy in Agroecology

The draft AU policy lacks explicit grounding in agroecology, risking the reinforcement of industrial, top-down models ill-suited to Africa's farming realities. While the draft outlines principles like collaboration, gender equality and farmer-centredness (Part 2), and calls for demand-driven research and development (R&D) (Section 5.4), it falls short of embedding participatory, agroecological approaches. **To safeguard FMSS, the policy must incorporate agroecological principles such as co-creation of knowledge, biodiversity, input reduction, fairness, ecological health and social value.**

Suggested amendments

- **Recognise co-creation of knowledge:** Affirm the equal value of scientific, indigenous and experiential knowledge through participatory R&D.
- **Reflect social and cultural seed values:** Acknowledge FMSS as cultural and social systems embedded in foodways, traditions and identities.
- **Protect decentralisation and diversity:** Ensure policy flexibility by upholding decentralised management of FMSS and resisting harmful harmonisation of seed standards.

FMSS are inherently agroecological, rooted in biodiversity, traditional knowledge, ecological balance and local networks. Without an agroecological framework, the policy could undermine the decentralised, adaptive systems that already feed the continent.

Potential objections from policymakers/government official/technical advisors and promoters of 'formal' seed and responses

African policymakers might raise several objections or concerns about making agroecology the core principle of an official seed systems strategy. **But without agroecology, this policy risks repeating the mistakes of industrial seed systems.** We do not need a top-down model; we need one that supports what already works for African farmers. Agroecology is not a niche—it is a continental solution. It aligns with CAADP, Agenda 2063 and Africa's biodiversity commitments. It is time to embed it in this policy. This is about sovereignty, not just sustainability. A policy rooted in agroecology affirms African farmers' right to define their own food and farming systems.

Some possible objections and responses include:

- **Perceived trade-offs with productivity and modernisation**: Policymakers may worry that agroecology is seen as less productive or slower to scale compared to industrial seed systems, potentially limiting national food security goals and economic growth targets. **Response:** Agroecology enhances productivity through diverse, locally adapted crops. FMSS provide 80–100% of seed in Africa and more than 70% of the food, proving their importance for food security and sustainable livelihoods.

- **Lack of clear, standardised definitions**: Agroecology can be understood differently across regions and sectors, leading to uncertainty about how to operationalise it within policy and regulation. **Response:** Agroecology is a flexible, principle-based framework adaptable to local contexts. Core principles are recognised by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), and several African governments.

- **Potential resistance from commercial seed sector**: A strong agroecology focus may be viewed as limiting private sector investment or favouring informal systems, which could be seen as a challenge to market-based approaches and seed industry growth. **Response:** FMSS and agroecology support inclusive seed systems where formal and informal markets coexist, opening opportunities for diverse seed varieties and local enterprises.

- **Resource and capacity constraints**: Policymakers might doubt the feasibility of implementing agroecological approaches at scale due to limited extension services, research capacity, infrastructure and funding. **Response:** Agroecological approaches build local capacity through extension, research and infrastructure. They offer a sustainable, cost-effective alternative to input-heavy models.

- **Complexity of governance and coordination**: Agroecology's emphasis on decentralisation, local knowledge and diverse actors could complicate policy harmonisation and regulatory oversight, making management and enforcement harder. **Response:** Decentralised, participatory governance strengthens policy relevance and community empowerment. Digital tools can aid coordination and oversight.

- **Political economy and vested interests**: Existing relationships with multinational seed companies and donors promoting conventional agriculture might create resistance to a fundamental shift towards agroecology. **Response**: Inclusive dialogue and multi-stakeholder engagement can align diverse interests. FMSS enhance rural economies and national food sovereignty.

- **Balancing short-term food security with long-term sustainability:** Policymakers may prioritise quick wins for immediate food supply over the longer-term systemic changes that agroecology seeks to achieve. **Response:** Agroecology offers immediate resilience and long-term sustainability by improving biodiversity, soil health and seed diversity.

Message 2: Create a Sui generis Regulatory Regime for FMSS

The policy must establish a flexible, inclusive regulatory framework for FMSS, grounded in African realities and distinct from commercial seed systems. FMSS rely on traditional knowledge, local networks and informal exchanges to preserve and distribute seed, making them central to seed security in Africa. Applying formal seed regulations risks creating barriers, undermining innovation and eroding biodiversity. Sections 3.1 and 5.4 of the draft policy propose registration and quality standards based on formal seed systems, which are inappropriate for FMSS and could exclude valuable local varieties.

A sui generis system is a unique legal or policy framework created to protect something that doesn't fit well into existing categories.

"Sui generis" is Latin for "of its own kind" – meaning the system is tailor-made for a specific purpose.

Suggested amendments

- **Promote voluntary, localised registration for documentation and characterisation**, not commercial marketing. Farmers should not be required to register seeds to grow, exchange or sell them.
- **Encourage decentralised, participatory quality assurance**, such as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), which allow communities to manage seed quality based on local priorities. Any standards based on DUS (Distinct, Uniform, Stable)-like criteria are unsuitable for FMSS, which are diverse and farmer-led.

These changes would align with international frameworks such as the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) Article 9, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) Article 19 and Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Article 8(j), supporting farmers' rights, access to seeds, and the protection of traditional knowledge. Applying formal seed rules to FMSS creates legal and practical barriers, undermines farmer innovation and erodes biodiversity.

Potential objections from policymakers/government official/technical advisors and promoters of 'formal' seed and responses

African policymakers might raise several objections or concerns about a sui generis regulatory system for FMSS. **Africa has an opportunity to lead the world by creating a sui generis policy for FMSS that reflects its own realities, rights and agricultural diversity, rather than copying industrial models.** Top-down, commercial-style seed laws disqualify most farmer varieties and alienate the smallholder farmers who feed the continent. A one-size-fits-all approach will shrink Africa's rich seed diversity. **What farmers are calling for is not a loophole, but seed freedom—policies that recognise how they already share, adapt and innovate with seed.**

Some possible objections and responses include:

- **Lack of quality assurance and risks to farmers**: Without standardised rules, how can we guarantee seed quality and protect farmers from poor or fake seed? A flexible approach may undermine trust and consistency. **Response**: FMSS already use trusted, community-based systems of seed quality, grounded in generations of practical experience. Approaches like PGS offer robust, locally accountable quality assurance that builds on farmers' own criteria. Evidence shows these systems are effective, low-cost and rooted in trust, peer review and local norms—especially where formal systems don't reach. Supporting farmers to strengthen these mechanisms is more realistic than imposing top-down standards that exclude their varieties and knowledge.

- **Difficulty integrating FMSS into national seed policy**: Creating a separate regime may complicate coordination with existing laws and regional harmonisation efforts. It risks fragmentation and could slow down policy implementation. **Response:** A sui generis regime does not mean creating a completely separate legal structure—it means adapting policy tools to fit the distinct nature of FMSS. This can be done within national seed strategies by creating flexible clauses or dedicated chapters that recognise farmer-led systems and their logic. This approach is already being explored by some African countries (e.g. Ethiopia, Malawi) and aligns with the AU's call for pluralistic seed systems.

- **Resistance from private sector and international donors**: Donors and commercial actors are pushing for harmonisation and formalisation. A sui generis system might be seen as anti-investment or lacking credibility. **Response:** Pluralism does not undermine markets—it strengthens them. FMSS expand the seed economy by enabling access to diverse, locally adapted varieties and supporting emerging local enterprises, many led by women and youth. Formal and informal systems can and do coexist. A sui generis regime opens pathways for innovation and new partnerships rather than blocking investment. In fact, many donors now support agroecology and farmer-led innovation as part of climate resilience and food sovereignty strategies.

- **Administrative and institutional capacity constraints**: No capacity or resources to manage multiple parallel systems. It's easier to adapt existing structures than build new ones. **Response**: The current reliance on formal systems has already stretched national capacities and failed to reach the majority of farmers. FMSS operate effectively without heavy bureaucracy and are sustained by community effort. Supporting these existing systems through simple legal recognition, participatory extension and decentralised structures is less costly and more scalable than attempting to formalise all farmers. Smart investment in what's already working makes better use of limited resources.

- **Concerns about enforcement and traceability**: How will we trace seed movement and ensure biosafety without a standard registration system? Informal exchanges make regulation and monitoring more difficult. **Response**: FMSS are embedded in localised, short-value chains, which inherently carry lower risk than long-distance seed trade. Biosafety concerns are more relevant to commercial seed imports and genetically modified varieties, not to seeds exchanged in trusted community networks. Participatory monitoring and digital tools can support traceability without imposing commercial registration burdens. Traceability systems must be fit-for-purpose—not one-size-fits-all.

- **Political sensitivity around 'informality'**: There's a perception that informal systems are outdated and less productive. Supporting them too strongly may be seen as a step backward, politically or ideologically. **Response:** FMSS are not informal in the sense of disorganised or outdated—they are indigenous knowledge-based, resilient and adaptive systems. They are the primary source of seed for more than 80% of African farmers and continue to evolve through farmer innovation. Agroecological farming, supported by FMSS, is increasingly recognised globally as key to sustainable development, food system transformation and climate adaptation. Policymakers have a chance to lead with pride in African solutions, not apologise for them.

- **Limited evidence of FMSS delivering large-scale impact**: While FMSS work at the community level, is there strong evidence they can deliver at scale or meet national productivity goals? **Response:** FMSS already produce over 70% of the food on the continent. That is scale. What they lack is not reach, but recognition. Enhancing FMSS through supportive policy, infrastructure and research will unlock even greater potential. Importantly, resilience and diversity, not just yield, must guide policy in the face of climate shocks. FMSS are often the only systems functioning when formal supply chains break down.

- **Risk of undermining harmonised regional efforts**: The AU and regional economic communities are moving towards harmonised seed laws. A sui generis regime could be seen as undermining regional integration and trade goals. **Response:** Harmonisation should not mean uniformity. The AU itself calls for pluralistic seed systems, and a growing number of member states are experimenting with adaptive approaches.

Message 3: FMSS Are Commons, Not Markets

The draft policy risks imposing a market-oriented framework on FMSS through language and clauses that prioritise standardisation, certification and commercial marketing. This reflects the logic of industrial seed systems, which is incompatible with the adaptive, community-based nature of FMSS.

Terms like "registration", "marketing" and "quality assurance" signal a shift towards commodification, threatening FMSS principles of sharing, collective stewardship and local control. Clauses proposing state-supervised community seed institutions, regulated seed markets and benefit-sharing mechanisms based on Indigenous Traditional Knowledge raise concerns about the inappropriate application of intellectual property rights to communal knowledge. FMSS reject this framing—farmer seeds are collective heritage, not private goods.

Suggested amendments

- **Designing protections for Farmers' Rights and traditional knowledge** based on international instruments like the CBD, ITPGRFA, UNDROP and the African Model Law, excluding intellectual property rights from FMSS.
- **Replacing commercial language with terms that reflect the non-market logic of FMSS**, such as "exchange" and "circulation".
- **Repositioning national institutions as enablers, not regulators**, by supporting FMSS with resources and recognition rather than oversight or standardisation.

Potential objections from policymakers/government official/technical advisors and promoters of 'formal' seed and responses

FMSS are rooted in community values, not market principles, and must not be regulated through industrial tools like certification or intellectual property rights that disrupt what already works. Language shapes law—terms like "marketing" distort the communal practices of sharing and exchange that define FMSS. These systems thrive because they are decentralised, diverse and adaptable. Applying a commercial lens would flatten this richness and exclude smallholders from their own seed systems. **Communities are custodians of seed and knowledge—not companies—and need protections, not patents.** The policy must defend the commons, not impose new barriers. Governments should empower farmers with support, not replicate commercial bureaucracy. FMSS are already recognised under global and regional legal instruments such as the CBD, ITPGRFA, UNDROP and Africa's Model Law. The AU should align with these frameworks to build seed sovereignty—not seed dependency.

Some possible objections and responses include:

- **Seed markets are essential for economic growth:** Opening seed markets can stimulate rural economies and create income opportunities. Why limit FMSS by excluding them from formal market frameworks? **Response:** FMSS already support local economies—but through a different logic than formal markets. Seed is shared, exchanged, bartered or sold at low cost within trusted networks, sustaining livelihoods without excluding those who cannot pay. Strengthening FMSS enhances rural resilience and food sovereignty, especially where formal markets do not reach. Recognising their distinct structure does not exclude enterprise—it ensures it is inclusive, localised and culturally appropriate.

- **All systems need minimum standards:** Without some form of quality assurance or oversight, how can we ensure the seeds exchanged in FMSS meet basic standards for germination and disease resistance? **Response:** FMSS have functioned for generations with their own standards, based on local knowledge, peer validation and ecological fit. Community-based quality systems like PGS offer credible, low-cost alternatives to top-down certification. Imposing uniform standards, especially those based on industrial criteria, risks disqualifying diverse and adaptive seeds that don't meet commercial definitions but perform well locally.

- **Documentation and benefit-sharing protect farmers:** Documenting Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and farmer varieties allows communities to claim recognition and benefit from their resources. Isn't that a step forward for farmer rights? **Response:** Benefit-sharing frameworks rooted in intellectual property law can unintentionally privatise communal knowledge. FMSS are built on open sharing and collective stewardship, not ownership. Documentation should be voluntary, community-led and non-proprietary—focused on preserving knowledge, not regulating its use. Protection comes not from ownership, but from legal recognition of farmers' rights to save, use and exchange seeds freely.

- **State institutions are needed to maintain order and coordination:** Leaving FMSS unregulated or loosely structured risks confusion and inefficiency. National institutions must have a supervisory role to ensure alignment with broader policy goals. **Response:** National institutions do have a role—but it must be enabling, not controlling. Supporting farmer networks with funding, infrastructure, participatory research and legal protection is more effective than formal oversight. FMSS are already highly organised at local levels, and top-down supervision risks eroding trust and adaptability. Coordination should respect community autonomy.

- **Excluding intellectual property rights might discourage innovation:** If farmer seed innovations aren't protected, how can we incentivise community research, breeding or scaling up successful varieties? **Response:** Innovation in FMSS comes from collective experimentation, not commercial incentives. Farmers constantly select, adapt and improve varieties based on local needs and shared knowledge. Intellectual property rights can undermine this culture by encouraging privatisation of resources that were previously accessible to all. Recognising customary innovation systems and supporting them through participatory breeding and farmer-led research is a more appropriate model.

- **Harmonisation with regional frameworks is non-negotiable:** Regional economic communities and the AU are moving toward harmonised seed laws. Too much flexibility or exclusion of market elements may create policy conflicts or delay integration. **Response:** Harmonisation can respect diversity. The African Union and regional economic communities support pluralistic seed systems—meaning different systems coexist. A sui generis regime for FMSS does not conflict with harmonisation if it is recognised as one valid system among others. Legal flexibility is essential in a continent with enormous agroecological and cultural diversity.

- **Commercial and communal systems must be treated equally:** Why should FMSS be exempt from the same rules formal seed systems follow? This creates an uneven playing field and may invite exploitation or abuse. **Response:** Equal treatment does not mean identical regulation. FMSS and commercial systems are fundamentally different in how they function, govern access and define success. Applying the same rules to both creates systemic exclusion for farmers. True equity means developing context-appropriate policies that reflect the reality of each system.

- **The language of 'commons' is politically ambiguous:** Referring to FMSS as 'commons' may imply resistance to regulation or state authority, raising concerns about sovereignty, traceability and legal clarity. **Response:** The term "commons" refers to shared stewardship of resources, not a rejection of state involvement. FMSS are not lawless—they are governed by customary norms and community accountability. Recognising seeds as a commons supports local democracy, sustainability and resilience—all priorities in African development frameworks. The state's role is to protect and support these systems, not replace them.

Message 4: Design and Deploy Inclusive Funding Mechanisms for FMSS

FMSS in Africa face systemic challenges, including poor storage infrastructure, limited farmer-led R&D, weak technical support, the growing dominance of formal seed markets, and policy environments that favour commercial systems. While the draft AU policy acknowledges the need for resource mobilisation, it lacks detail on funding mechanisms tailored to FMSS. The proposed use of public-private partnerships (PPPs) raises concern, as such arrangements often favour commercial seed varieties and formal certification, undermining farmers' rights and agrobiodiversity. Without safeguards, PPPs could increase inequality and dependency. The policy also overlooks the innovation and resilience already embedded in FMSS and fails to offer financing models that reduce reliance on donor funding.

Suggested amendments

- **Redirect Farm Input Subsidy Programmes (FISPs) to support FMSS**: This would improve access to locally preferred seed, reduce spending on imported commercial varieties, and strengthen food sovereignty.
- **Commit to exploring local, solidarity-based financing models**: These could include seed cooperatives, local savings groups and revolving funds that keep resources circulating within communities.
- **Audit and reallocate public R&D budgets**: Ensure that public funds support participatory, farmer-led seed innovation and review allocations in areas such as technology development, climate adaptation and local economic development to better align with FMSS needs.

Potential objections from policymakers/government official/technical advisors and promoters of 'formal' seed and responses

Funding must prioritise farmers' control and self-determination rather than the interests of funders, as conditional money risks distorting FMSS priorities. PPPs often shift power towards corporate agendas, sidelining smallholder needs. Investments should build farmer autonomy by supporting local innovation, solidarity finance and existing farmer-led systems rather than creating dependency. Farmers already innovate with storage, seed banks and exchanges; they need support, not replacement. Seed funds must be designed, governed and held accountable by farmers, avoiding outsourcing to private actors. Redirecting subsidies from imported seed towards locally adapted, farmer-selected systems will strengthen seed sovereignty. Financing rooted in community savings groups, cooperatives and public R&D offers resilience and should be scaled. **Ultimately, financing must align with FMSS principles, as true resilience is cultivated, not bought.**

Some possible objections and responses include:

- **Limited fiscal space and competing priorities:** Governments face tight budgets and many urgent needs; redirecting subsidies or funds to FMSS may not be feasible or politically popular. **Response:** Investing in FMSS is a cost-effective way to enhance food security and resilience. Redirecting some subsidy funds to locally adapted seed reduces reliance on expensive imports and input-heavy models, freeing resources for other priorities. Supporting FMSS strengthens community self-reliance, reducing long-term welfare costs.

- **Complexity of integrating FMSS into existing subsidy programmes:** FISPs are already complex and focused on certified commercial inputs; including FMSS seeds may complicate administration and undermine existing systems. **Response:** Integrating FMSS into FISPS can be done gradually and flexibly, prioritising local seed varieties that farmers already trust. Simplified procedures and pilot programmes can demonstrate feasibility before scaling up.

- **Concerns about scale and impact of local financing models:** Community-based financing like cooperatives or savings groups may lack the scale, sustainability or transparency needed to support seed systems nationally. **Response:** Community-based financing models like cooperatives have proven effective in many African contexts, building trust and mobilising local resources sustainably. When combined with government support and capacity building, they can complement formal finance and reach underserved farmers.

- **Risk of mismanagement and corruption:** Local financing mechanisms and seed cooperatives could be vulnerable to mismanagement or elite capture without strong oversight. **Response:** Transparency and accountability mechanisms can be embedded in community financing models, including participatory governance, regular audits and capacity building. Empowering farmers with ownership over funds reduces risk of elite capture.

- **Donor dependency remains unavoidable:** Many programmes rely on external funding. Reducing donor dependence will be difficult without new international commitments or partnerships. **Response:** While donor support remains important, developing local financing reduces vulnerability to shifting donor priorities and conditionalities. This builds long-term resilience and ensures funding aligns with local needs and values.

- **Need to prioritise commercial seed sector for agricultural modernisation:** Supporting FMSS financing could divert resources from formal seed sector development, which is viewed as essential for national productivity and economic growth. **Response:** FMSS and commercial seed sectors serve different but complementary roles. Supporting FMSS does not undermine commercial development but ensures millions of smallholders retain access to diverse, locally adapted seeds crucial for food security and climate adaptation.

- **Limited capacity for participatory R&D and budget auditing:** Governments may lack technical skills and systems to audit R&D spending effectively or to support participatory, farmer-led innovation at scale. **Response:** Capacity gaps can be addressed through targeted training, partnerships with research institutions and leveraging digital tools. Participatory R&D enhances relevance and uptake of innovations by farmers, improving efficiency of public spending.

- **Political resistance to changing subsidy and funding structures:** Established interests in seed markets and agribusiness may resist reforms that shift resources toward FMSS or community-based financing. **Response:** Building broad-based coalitions including farmer organisations, civil society and progressive policymakers can help overcome resistance. Evidence from successful FMSS support programmes can demonstrate benefits and build political will for reform.

Message 5: FMSS are Guardians and Multipliers of Biodiversity

Farmers, particularly women, have been the primary stewards of agricultural biodiversity for centuries, using deep, intergenerational knowledge to select, breed and adapt seeds to local conditions. This ongoing, place-based innovation sustains crop diversity essential for food security, cultural identity and ecological resilience—roles that formal systems cannot replicate. While the draft policy acknowledges FMSS in conserving biodiversity, it fails to recognise their active role in breeding, knowledge conservation and multiplying agrobiodiversity.

This marginalisation also weakens recognition of FMSS contributions to climate adaptation and resilience.

Suggested amendments

- **Explicitly recognise FMSS as the primary guardians of biodiversity and breeders** of diverse crop varieties.
- **Highlight FMSS' role in climate change** adaptation and resilience within the policy.
- **Ensure alignment and updates to related policies**, such as National Biodiversity Strategies, to support FMSS and direct funding accordingly.

Potential objections from policymakers/government official/technical advisors and promoters of 'formal' seed and responses

Some possible objections and responses include:

- **Policy scope and priorities:** Biodiversity conservation is a broad issue involving many stakeholders; focusing heavily on FMSS may overlook other important contributors like formal research institutions and commercial breeders. **Response:** FMSS complement formal research and commercial breeding by maintaining diverse, locally adapted varieties that formal systems often overlook. Recognising FMSS strengthens the entire biodiversity landscape rather than competing with other actors. The two systems are interdependent with the formal sector often reliant on germplasm originating from FMSS.

- **Evidence and impact:** Is there sufficient scientific data to quantify the breeding and biodiversity contributions of FMSS compared to formal systems to justify prioritising them in policy? **Response:** Extensive ethnobotanical and agricultural studies document FMSS contributions to agrobiodiversity and crop adaptation. Their role is well established across Africa, and acknowledging it aligns policy with on-the-ground realities.

- **Resource allocation challenges:** Given limited resources, how can we justify directing more funding and policy attention specifically to FMSS over other biodiversity or climate adaptation initiatives? **Response:** Directing resources to FMSS is a strategic investment in resilience, food security and climate adaptation for the majority of smallholder farmers. Supporting FMSS complements rather than diverts from broader biodiversity initiatives.

- **Integration with existing strategies:** Updating multiple policies to reflect FMSS roles could be complex and slow, delaying urgent biodiversity and climate action. **Response:** Policy updates can be phased and coordinated to minimise delays, with pilot projects demonstrating benefits. Aligning policies ensures coherence and maximises impact across sectors.

- **Capacity and support limitations:** FMSS may lack the institutional capacity or technical resources to scale up breeding and conservation efforts effectively without significant investment. **Response:** Strengthening FMSS requires investment in farmer-led extension, participatory research and infrastructure—areas with proven effectiveness. Building capacity empowers communities and ensures sustainable outcomes.

- **Balancing traditional and modern approaches:** While FMSS are important, formal breeding programmes and agroecological practices also need strengthening to meet national food security and biodiversity goals. **Response:** FMSS and formal programmes are complementary, each with unique strengths. Supporting both creates a pluralistic seed system that enhances biodiversity and food security more effectively than either alone.

- **Political and institutional inertia:** Existing policies and institutions may resist shifts in focus or funding that appear to prioritise informal or traditional systems over formal ones. **Response:** Engaging diverse stakeholders, including farmer organisations and civil society, can build political will. Demonstrating FMSS successes and aligning with international commitments helps overcome resistance.

3. GENERAL TIPS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Remember that policymakers are people too! They have professional responsibilities and work mandates that they need to negotiate. It is important to speak their language and help them to fulfil their commitments. See the policymaker persona on the following page.

Top Tips for Engagement

- **Remember that not all policymakers are familiar with FMSS**: Start by outlining the key points of FMSS (see alongside).
- **Be clear on your mandate and legitimacy**: Ground your presence in the voices and priorities of smallholder farmers, Indigenous communities and grassroots networks. Present yourself not just as an NGO, but as a bridge to lived realities.
- **Understand the AU context and decision-making process**: Recognise that the AU operates through consensus, often guided by Member State interests and regional diplomacy. Focus on constructive alignment rather than confrontation.
- **Frame messages in AU-friendly language**: Use terms that resonate within AU spaces—such as: "Agenda 2063 and the Africa We Want", "African solutions to African challenges", "Food sovereignty and resilience", "Inclusive innovation" and "Climate resilience". Link FMSS to development, youth employment, gender equality and climate adaptation.
- **Centre values without moralising:** You are there to influence, not preach. Bring your values of justice, sovereignty and biodiversity—but do so by appealing to shared goals: resilience, food security, climate action and prosperity.
- **Choose your messengers strategically**: Where possible, farmers, Indigenous leaders or youth representatives should speak for themselves. Power dynamics shift when policymakers see real people, not just NGOs.
- **Do not try to win the room—win the follow-up**: AU policy change is slow and political. Use the consultation to gain traction, plant ideas and secure follow-up meetings or working group invitations. Leave a document or contact that invites continued conversation.
- **Practice disciplined messaging**: Have three core points—and repeat them often. Powerholders respond better to clarity and consistency than to information overload.
- **Use real-world case studies and examples** where possible to prove the point. See case study section.

FMSS are the backbone of African agriculture, supplying over 80% of the continent's seed. Led by smallholder farmers—particularly women—FMSS are rooted in local knowledge, cultural practices and community networks of seed saving, exchange and selection.

They offer low-cost, biodiverse and climate-resilient alternatives to industrial seed systems, maintaining varieties adapted to Africa's diverse agroecological conditions.

FMSS are vital for food sovereignty, seed security, ecosystem restoration and the empowerment of women.

Supporting them is essential to building resilient, just and sustainable food systems across the continent."

- **Stay respectful but assertive**: Speak with confidence—you represent constituencies whose voices matter. Hold space with calm authority, and do not be afraid to say, "We'd like that point reflected in the outcome document" or "That contradicts farmers' lived experience."
- **Link it to African Union frameworks and global commitments** (see next section).

THE POLICYMAKER PERSONA

Roles and responsibilities

- Government official or advisor within a relevant ministry (e.g. Agriculture, Environment, Rural Development, Trade or Science and Technology).
- Tasked with contributing to or shaping national or regional seed policies.
- Participates in African Union (AU) or Regional Economic Community (REC) consultations on seed governance.
- Oversees or informs national seed certification, extension, or regulatory frameworks.

Key professional interests

- Ensuring national food and seed security.
- Promoting economic development, rural livelihoods and modernisation of agriculture.
- Aligning national laws with continental frameworks and international commitments (e.g. AU, AfCFTA, SDGs).
- Balancing farmer rights with seed industry growth and investment opportunities.
- Responding to climate change, biodiversity loss and regional instability.

Knowledge and capacity

- Varies: some may be highly informed on FMSS and agroecology; others may have limited understanding or rely heavily on technical advisors.
- Likely to be more familiar with formal seed systems, private sector perspectives and yield-focused metrics.
- May lack direct exposure to farmer-led systems or Indigenous knowledge unless engaged through participatory processes.

Concerns and objections

- May question the scalability, reliability or economic potential of FMSS.
- Concerned about regulation, quality assurance and intellectual property rights.
- Needs evidence of FMSS contributing to development goals and climate resilience.

Opportunities for engagement

- Influenced by clear, evidence-based advocacy showing FMSS benefits.
- Responsive to case studies, peer country examples and cost-benefit comparisons.
- Values multi-stakeholder dialogue and alignment with AU frameworks.
- May support hybrid approaches if convinced FMSS can coexist with formal systems.

4. RELEVANT FRAMEWORKS

The most relevant frameworks for FMSS are described in the table below.

Framework	Commitment focus	FMSS linkage	Relevant SDGs
UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) **UNDROP Articles 19 & 20** – Rights to seed and biodiversity.	Articles 19 & 20 affirm rights to seeds, traditional knowledge and biodiversity. ***Why it matters:*** *Asserts rights to seeds, land, biodiversity and participation in seed governance.*	Recognises farmers as custodians of seed diversity. FMSS protect these rights through community-based seed saving, sharing and breeding.	SDG 2.3, 2.5, 10.2, 12.2
International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) **ITPGRFA Article 9** – Farmers' Rights.	Article 9 covers Farmers' Rights, including the right to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed. ***Why it matters:*** *Explicitly protects Farmers' Rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed.*	FMSS are key for fulfilling Article 9. They promote on-farm conservation, local adaptation and farmer innovation.	SDG 2.5, 15.6
Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) incl. **Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework** **CBD Articles 8(j) & 10(c)** – Customary use and traditional knowledge.	Emphasises conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and equitable benefit sharing. ***Why it matters:*** *Recognises farmers and Indigenous communities as custodians of biodiversity.*	FMSS conserve agrobiodiversity in situ, particularly through Indigenous and local practices. Supports Targets 4, 9, 10.	SDG 15.5, 15.6, 13.1

Framework	Commitment focus	FMSS linkage	Relevant SDGs
Africa's Model Law on the Protection of the Rights of Local Communities, Farmers and Breeders, and Access to Biological Resources Section 3 – Community Rights and Farmers' Rights. Enshrines farmers' rights to seed, benefit-sharing and control over biological resources.	Enshrines farmers' rights to seed, benefit-sharing and control over biological resources. ***Why it matters:*** *Provides strong protections for farmer seed systems, collective innovation and benefit sharing.*	Encourages states to protect FMSS, uphold customary rights and avoid criminalising farmer seed exchange.	SDG 2.3, 2.5, 16.7
UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**	Emphasises adaptation, resilience and food security under climate change.	FMSS promote crop diversity, decentralised seed access and climate-resilient farming systems.	SDG 13.1, 2.4, 1.5
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)	Affirms Indigenous peoples' rights to seeds, land, traditional knowledge and development.	FMSS safeguard Indigenous food systems and seed stewardship aligned with cultural and ecological knowledge.	SDG 1.4, 2.3, 10.2, 15.6

Policymakers and technocrats have a mandate aligned to national, regional and international frameworks. Try and link your message to their existing obligations.

5. USING CASE STUDIES AS A STRATEGY

The following case studies provide evidence for the contributions and benefits of FMSS in Africa. There are many such studies that prove the viability and robustness of FMSS in Africa.

Seed Sovereignty, Farmer Innovation and Livelihoods, Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe's Chimanimani district, the **TSURO Trust has demonstrated the transformative potential of a decentralised, community-led seed system through a farmer-managed approach that prioritises autonomy, biodiversity and resilience**. Working across 19 districts and reaching more than 2 800 direct and indirect beneficiaries, the Trust supported 200 trained seed growers in reviving, multiplying and distributing open-pollinated varieties. A community seed bank and regular local seed fairs became key platforms for preserving and exchanging diverse, drought-resilient seed varieties rooted in traditional knowledge and agroecological practices.

This farmer-led system ensured that smallholder farmers had reliable access to quality seed of their choice—particularly during critical times such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It enabled timely planting, improved food and nutritional security, and supported the cultivation of drought-tolerant traditional crops well-suited to local conditions. **Farmers benefited economicall**y, with income from seed sales increasing from an average of $185 to $600 within a single year, while seed saving and local exchange **reduced dependency on costly commercial inputs**. From a policy perspective, the TSURO Trust model contributes to national seed sovereignty by reducing reliance on commercial seed imports and promoting climate adaptation through the revival of underutilised local species. It enhances rural livelihoods in remote areas through farmer-led innovation and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, while also supporting biodiversity conservation and sustainable local seed economies.

Government Support for FMSS, South Africa

A pioneering collaboration between the National Plant Genetic Resources Centre (NPGRC) under South Africa's Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, research institutions and farming communities has shown how formal institutions can effectively support FMSS. Through strategic capacity building, government researchers and extension officers were trained in participatory plant breeding, seed conservation and local governance. FMSS hubs were established in Gumbu (Limpopo), Jericho (North West) and Sterkspruit (Eastern Cape), co-managed by local farmers with support from the NPGRC and Agricultural Research Council. The NPGRC formally integrated FMSS into the national seed conservation strategy, facilitating regular seed and knowledge exchange with the national gene bank. Participatory variety selection trials of crops such as cowpea, okra, millet and sorghum helped revitalise indigenous seed knowledge and enhance climate resilience. Two practical handbooks—used globally in training initiatives—were developed for FMSS facilitators and farmers. The initiative has influenced regional policy dialogue, shaped a continental protocol on FMSS–gene bank collaboration and was featured in the Springer Handbook of Climate Change Management as a model of resilience and adaptation.

Farmers as Breeders, Togo

The experience of the SPG ATODAD initiative in Togo demonstrates the effectiveness of a farmer-led, community-based approach to seed production and quality assurance. **Over three years, the initiative produced and distributed more than 460 tons of climate-resilient organic seed varieties**, including soya, groundnuts and sesame. This was achieved without reliance on state-imposed registration systems or externally imposed quality assurance testing models, which are unsuitable for diverse, farmer-selected seed. Instead, the initiative used a PGS to ensure quality, trust and transparency with a community-led

certification scheme with internal audits and quality control. The system **mobilised more than 15 000 stakeholders, including seed multipliers, farmers and consumers, and led to a 40% improvement in productivity and competitiveness**. It also strengthened seed autonomy, resilience and local economies—proving that decentralised, farmer-centred seed systems can deliver high-quality results while remaining inclusive and adaptive.

Community-based Quality Assurance Model, Senegal

The GIE Ballal Cooperative in Senegal has transformed how seed quality is understood and achieved by farmers. Since 2007, Ballal has developed a robust FMSS producing over 200 varieties of vegetables, herbs and medicinal plants—including crops like asparagus, turmeric and Echinacea—previously thought unsuitable for African cultivation. **All seeds are bred, multiplied and tested using agroecological methods, without chemicals or imported inputs**. Ballal's community-based quality assurance model includes three full growing seasons for testing before seed release, ensuring consistency, viability and adaptability. This decentralised process is rooted in local knowledge, peer review and field-based evaluation, not external certification. **The model now spans six West African countries, offering a practical alternative to top-down seed regulation**. Farmers now have year-round access to diverse, affordable and high-quality seed, free from hybrid or chemically treated imports. The approach boosts seed autonomy, food sovereignty and resilience—particularly among women and youth. For governments, Ballal provides a working model for how farmer-led systems can meet rigorous quality standards while advancing national goals for climate adaptation, agroecological transition and public health.

Contribution to Climate Resilience, Cameroon

In Cameroon, the Concertation Nationale des Organisations Paysannes is revitalising indigenous knowledge to conserve and propagate the Village Groundnut, a climate-resilient, endemic variety. Central to this effort is the use of traditional bottle-shaped granaries made from locally sourced bamboo raffia, which effectively preserve seed viability over long periods. This low-cost, culturally rooted technology ensures rural communities have reliable access to quality seed year-round, reducing post-harvest losses and enabling timely planting. The promotion of indigenous groundnut varieties adapted to forest and highland agroecological zones has led to improved yields and strengthened community autonomy in food and seed production. **For governments, this farmer-led model enhances national food and seed security without dependence on costly external inputs, preserves biodiversity and traditional knowledge, and offers a scalable solution for rural resilience and climate adaptation**, particularly in marginal areas.

Revival and Preservation of Agrobiodiversity, Tunisia

In Tunisia, the Lella Kmar El Baya cooperative successfully revived Mahmoudi, an indigenous durum wheat variety known for its drought, pest and disease resistance. Starting from a single bag of seed, smallholder farmers expanded cultivation to 250 hectares using organic methods with minimal irrigation and no synthetic inputs. This approach lowered production costs, improved resilience under drought conditions, and provided farmers with taller straw for livestock fodder, reducing feed expenses. The wheat also commands higher market prices, enabling farmers to save seed on their farms, strengthening their autonomy and income. Beyond individual benefits, this initiative supports national food sovereignty by reducing reliance on imported wheat, conserving groundwater, and generating local economic opportunities through value-added processing and exports.

Together, these cases highlight how FMSS are not only preserving heritage varieties but also acting as powerful centres of grassroots innovation. They provide practical, locally adapted pathways for climate resilience, food sovereignty and sustainable rural development that complement broader agricultural and environmental policies.

6. GLOSSARY

- **Access and benefit sharing**: Rules governing access to genetic resources and fair sharing of benefits between users and providers.
- **Access to seeds**: Farmers' ability to obtain quality diverse and adapted seeds within their communities including physical and economic access.
- **Biosafety**: Measures to prevent ecological and health risks from genetically modified organisms and synthetic life forms in agriculture.
- **Commercial seed system**: Regulated system producing/selling certified seeds for commercial use.
- **Community seed bank**: A local, farmer-managed facility for storing and conserving seeds, mostly for community use.
- **Conservation**: Protecting or restoring natural environments and genetic diversity either in farmers' fields (in situ) or in gene banks (ex situ).
- **Consistency, accessibility and suitability** (CAS): Proposed criteria for seeds meeting farmers' needs: reliable performance affordable and timely access and cultural and environmental fit.
- **Distinctness uniformity and stability** (DUS): Criteria to test new seed varieties for uniqueness uniformity and genetic stability.
- **Farmer variety**: A traditional variety developed and maintained by farmers, identified by distinct characteristics and associated knowledge.
- **Farmer-managed seed system** (FMSS): Community-based systems where farmers conserve, produce, exchange and trade seeds, guided by traditional knowledge and local customs.
- **Farmers' seeds**: Seeds maintained and multiplied by farmers naturally adapted over generations.
- **Farm-saved seed**: Seed selected and stored by farmers for future planting.
- **Formal seed system**: A regulated chain producing certified seed through breeders, seed companies and agro-dealers, subject to government standards.
- **Gender**: Socially constructed roles and norms assigned to women, men, girls and boys, which vary across cultures and time.
- **Gene bank**: A facility that stores genetic material to preserve biodiversity.
- **Genetic resources**: Living organisms with hereditary material of actual or potential value.
- **Inclusivity**: Ensuring access and participation for marginalised or excluded groups in a fair, respectful manner.
- **Indigenous Knowledge**: Traditional knowledge systems developed through long-term interaction with local environments.
- **Informal seed system**: Locally organised systems of saving, producing and exchanging seed, typically outside formal regulation.
- **Institutional framework**: Legal and policy structures assigning responsibilities to agencies, such as FMSS support.
- **Intellectual property rights** (IPRs): Legal protections for plant varieties and breeders' innovations.
- **Labelling**: Information provided on seed packaging to guide recognition and use.
- **Landrace**: Locally adapted crop variety shaped by environmental and cultural conditions over time.
- **Quality declared seed** (QDS): Seed produced by registered smallholder farmers meeting specified standards and quality checks.
- **Seed certification**: Official quality control process ensuring seed meets standards for public use.
- **Seed quality assurance**: Technical inspections and testing to ensure seed meets physical and performance expectations.
- **Seed registration**: Official approval of seed varieties for use and sale under regulatory standards.
- **Seed sector**: The combined systems, chains and activities that deliver seed to farmers.
- **Seed variety registration**: Official documentation and recognition of new seed varieties based on unique traits for further multiplication.
- **Seed**: Propagation material for crops, trees, livestock, fish and other species.
- **Smallholder farmers**: Resource-limited farmers and rural producers often vulnerable to shocks and food insecurity.

ALLIANCE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN AFRICA

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