

POLICY BRIEF FOR AFRICAN LEADERS

Farmer Managed Seed Systems : Foundations of Climate Resilience, Food Sovereignty and Sustainable Food Systems in Africa



INTRODUCTION

Africa is facing an unprecedented food crisis, exacerbated by climate shocks, conflict and dependence on imports. Yet a proven solution exists right before our eyes : **Farmer Managed Seed Systems (FMSS)**. These systems, locally managed by farmers, provide 80 to 95% of the seeds used by smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa. They embody ancestral agroecological wisdom, preserve biodiversity and ensure resilience to climate change. This policy brief calls on African leaders to place FMSS at the heart of agricultural policies to build sustainable, inclusive and sovereign food systems.



1. FMSS : a little-known pillar of African food security

FMSS are a set of local practices for seed selection, production, conservation and exchange by farmers themselves. These systems :

- Are adapted to local agroecological conditions.
- Are based on traditional and community knowledge.
- Promote cultivated biodiversity.
- Ensure food and nutritional security through their diversity

a) Speaking figures

- 80-100% of seeds planted by smallholder farmers come from FMSS.
- Women, who make up 60-80% of the agricultural workforce, are its key guardians.
- FMSS preserve hundreds of neglected and underutilised crops such as vuanzu, fonio and teff, which are essential for nutrition and climate adaptation.

b) Key benefits of FMSS

- **Climate resilience** : Farm seeds are selected over generations to resist drought, pests and local diseases.
- **Agricultural Biodiversity** : FMSS maintain crucial genetic diversity that is absent from homogenised commercial seeds (often subject to DUS criteria : Distinctness, Uniformity, Stability).
- **Local Autonomy** : They reduce dependence on imports (Africa produces only 2% of the world's certified seeds) and protect communities from market volatility.

c) Challenges and threats

- **FMSS** face serious threats from seed law harmonization, UPOV 91 pressures, and restrictive, punitive seed regulations. These frameworks prioritize corporate control, undermine traditional seed sharing, criminalize farmer practices, and erode biodiversity, thereby endangering seed sovereignty, food security, and the resilience of smallholder farming communities across Africa.
- **Political marginalisation** : Only 20% of smallholder farmers have access to “improved” seeds; they are insufficient and expensive despite subsidies. National policies favour formal seed systems, depriving FMSS of legal recognition and funding.
- **Neglect of traditional varieties** : Traditional crops like millet and sorghum are being neglected as donors and governments promote Green Revolution-style farming focused on commercial crops like maize and rice. Over the past 20 years, subsidies and incentives have diverted land and investment away from traditional varieties. As a result, millet production dropped by 24% and yields declined by 21% by 2018.
- **Climate and economic pressure** : Extreme events and restrictive regulations hinder the exchange and conservation of farm-saved seeds. The standardisation of commercial seeds and the gradual abandonment of local varieties are leading to a loss of genetic diversity. This erosion reduces the capacity of agricultural systems to adapt to climate change, disease and varied nutritional needs. It also threatens traditional knowledge related to seed cultivation and selection.
- **Social exclusion** : Women and young people, who are key actors in FMSS, are often excluded from decision-making and access to resources (land, credit) related to the development of so-called improved seeds.

2. Why must African leaders act now ?

a) Climate Emergency and Food Security

FMSS are a **lifeline in the face of climate change**. Local varieties, such as amaranth and other plants that are neglected or overlooked by public policy, can tolerate conditions that industrial seeds cannot. Investing in FMSS means securing food for millions of Africans facing water insecurity and crop losses.

b) Green Economy and Youth Employment

Job creation : Farmer Managed Seed Systems offers entrepreneurial opportunities for young people (production, processing and marketing of adapted seeds). Because they thrive in local ecological conditions, entrepreneurship in the field of bio-inputs is intensifying as a knock-on effect.

Import Reduction : Supporting local seed companies would reduce the seed import bill, estimated at several billion dollars annually.

c) Social inclusion and equity

Women and young people : Farmer Managed Seed Systems are a lever for empowerment. Women preserve 90% of traditional seed-related knowledge. Young people, who are innovative and connected, can modernise these systems through digital technology (exchange platforms, databases).

Marginalised Communities : FMSS help displaced or vulnerable households rebuild their livelihoods through solidarity networks (e.g. community seed banks).

d) Alignment with Continental Commitments

FMSS give concrete expression to the objectives of **Agenda 2063**, the comprehensive african agriculture development plan (**CAADP**) and the Kampala Declaration. They also meet the requirements of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources (**ITPGRFA**) and **UN Farmers Rights Treaty (UNDRIP)**, which recognise farmers' right to "conserve, use, exchange and sell farm-savings seeds".

3. Key Policy Recommendations

Inspired by the African Model Law for the Protection of the Rights of Local Communities, Farmers and Breeders and for the Regulation of Access to Biological Resources, these priority actions require bold leadership :

1. Legal and Institutional Recognition

- Integrate FMSS into national seed laws : recognise farmers' seeds as "quality seeds" through alternative mechanisms (self-certification, participatory guarantee systems, etc.), while recognising the rights of farmers to retain, use, exchange and sell their seeds freely.
- Protect farmers' rights to their varieties and traditional knowledge.
- Create appropriate regulatory frameworks : simplify the registration of farmers' varieties based on local standards and criteria such as Coherence, Accessibility, Adequacy rather than restrictive criteria.

2. Targeted investment and innovative financing

Farmers must be recognised as co-producers of knowledge. It is essential to finance collaborative research and participatory breeding programmes :

- Mobilise the Fund for Plant Genetic Resources : allocate resources to participatory research, community seed banks and farmer training.
- Support local infrastructure : develop community seed banks to store seeds and serve as knowledge centres.
- Public-Private-Peasants partnerships (4P) : encourage the private sector to invest in FMSS through tax incentives and dedicated seed funds.

3. Capacity Building and Innovation

- Education and Training : integrate FMSS into agricultural curricula (schools, universities) and create farmer field schools to train farmers in conservation and participatory selection techniques.
- Awareness raising : promoting the importance of farm-saved seeds for food sovereignty and climate resilience.
- Co-creative research or co-creation of knowledge : support the co-generation of technologies between farmers, scientists and the private sector (e.g. participatory selection of resistant varieties).

4. Inclusion and Equity

- Women's empowerment : strengthen their roles in the management of community seed banks.
- Youth engagement : launch FMSS "Agripreneurs" programmes with access to digital technology, markets and mentoring.

Conclusion : A strategic imperative for Africa

SSPs are not a return to the past, but a path to the future for a food-secure, resilient and sovereign Africa. They embody a **made-in-Africa** solution to climate and food challenges. Building on the Kampala Declaration, African leaders can :

1. Secure food security in the face of crises.
2. Create millions of green jobs for young people and women.
3. Promote the continent's genetic heritage.
4. Reduce external dependence.

Peasant seed systems are therefore not relics of the past, but living pillars of sustainable agriculture and African food sovereignty. Recognising, strengthening and protecting them is a strategic priority.

The call to action is clear : legally recognise FMSS, invest in their infrastructure, and place family farms at the heart of decision-making. As the African proverb says, "The seed does not refuse to grow". Let us simply give it the political soil it deserves.

Key references

- Policy Framework for the Development of Resilient Peasant Seed Systems in Africa (AU, 2024).
- African Union Agenda 2063 and Kampala Declaration.
- International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA).
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)
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- Data from ISSD Africa (2022), The People's Hub (2022).