



AFRICAN FARMERS' SEED RIGHTS THREATENED

THE PROBLEM

Around 80% of the food consumed in Africa is produced locally and, as various researches show, the vast majority of farmers who provide this food use locally adapted seeds from “informal” farmer-managed seed systems (FMSS). Most seeds come from farmers’ own stocks of saved seed, from neighbours, and from local markets. A recent study drawn from observations across six African countries and covering 40 crops, found that farmers still access 90% of their seed from the so-called informal system. (McGuire, S. & Sperling, L. 2016).



Today’s seed embodies centuries of knowledge about how to conserve, change, plant and guide it to fruitful expression. Seed is about culture, tradition, spirituality, cooperation and diversity. And finally, seed is about survival, about providing diverse and healthy food to feed families

every day. Africa’s rich diversity of food crops is thanks to local farming communities collecting, conserving, developing and exchanging seeds for countless generations.

Farmers' seeds are the basis of agricultural production across Africa, yet they receive little or no support from African governments. Local seeds are reliable, available and affordable, but the seed corporations want them outlawed. These seeds and the cultural systems and knowledge that underpin them are under threat from policies designed to benefit corporate interests, while criminalizing and vilifying farmer managed seed systems. They are dismissed by policy makers as out-dated



practices, to be replaced by the so-called 'formal' seed system which promotes so-called 'improved' hybrid and GMO seeds supplied by commercial seed companies.

The seed industry has concocted a narrative that places hunger squarely at the door of African smallholders and their 'backward practices' and 'low yielding, diseased seed'. This narrative has found traction amongst many African governments, which are acquiescing to industry demands for enabling legal and policy environments to attract the

formal seed industry. They propose nothing less than the wholesale replacement of FMSS with a small portfolio of 'improved varieties' bred to produce high yields in industrial agricultural systems.

To support the expansion of the private seed industry on the continent, a raft of new policy and legal changes are on the table. Two distinct areas are targeted, namely the establishment of Plant Breeders' Rights (PBR) regimes and the revision or implementation of seed trade laws that regulate standards and procedures to place seed on the market. Strict PBR regimes that are designed to benefit the seed industry are being imposed on multiple countries simultaneously through regional organisations such as the African Regional Intellectual Property Organisation (ARIPO) and its francophone counterpart OAPI, as well as through Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as SADC, COMESA and ECOWAS. (ACB, 2012).

THE SOLUTION

Research: Gather evidence of the benefits of farmer managed seed systems for climate change, nutrition, agricultural biodiversity, and expose the corporate seed industry myths. Develop a clear and evidence based narrative for the transition to agroecology in Africa.

Raising consumer and public awareness: More and more people will recognize the value of traditional foods and seed varieties. African consumers will become much more active in the



food sovereignty movement, and use their purchasing power to support local food producers.

Building the movement: Bring the food sovereignty movement together at grassroots level, enabling the genuine farmers' voice for agroecology to be heard across the continent.

Advocacy: Influence critical decision-makers to wake up to the dangers of flawed seed policies; scrap the externally-driven and damaging seed laws; and recognize that the future of African food systems lies in supporting African food producers to provide sustainable African solutions.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Farmers' seeds feed Africa.** Farmer-managed seed systems are the principal source of seeds of food crops in Africa, yet national and regional seed policies undermine them.
- **Farmers' seeds are reliable, available and affordable.** Small farmers prefer farm-saved seeds, which are stored locally, require no cash outlay, and can be relied on to produce nutritious crops and seeds.
- **Farmers' seed practices are diverse and knowledge-rich.** They are highly diverse, sophisticated and based on the rich cultural

heritage and traditional knowledge of local communities, which have been handed down over generations.

- **Women are Africa's seed guardians.** Although acknowledged as the principal seed keepers within their communities, their contribution seldom receives official recognition and support.
- **Farmer-managed seed systems underpin small-scale agroecological production and food sovereignty.** Farmer's diverse, ecologically resilient seeds are appropriate for biodiverse, agroecological food production, now and for the future.
- **Farmers are being pushed to abandon their seed systems.** Well-funded promotion, subsidies, coercion and advertising are being deployed in an attempt to roll out industrial seeds designed for monocultures and chemicals, and to displace heterogeneous farmers' varieties suited to biodiverse agroecological contexts.
- **African governments are giving in to corporate pressure and undermining local seed systems.** Governments are being pressured to join regional agreements on intellectual property, trade and seed, such as OAPI, ARIPO, UEMOA, COMESA and SADC, which benefit corporations and the industrial seed system, and often the governments are giving in.



AFSA is a broad alliance of civil society actors who are part of the struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. It is a network of networks, currently with 37 members active in 50 African countries. These include African food producer networks, African NGO networks, indigenous people's organizations, faith based organizations, women and youth groups, consumer movements, and international organizations that support the stance of the alliance.

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