

Advancing agroecology and farmer managed seed systems in Limpopo

BRIEFING, MAY 2020

At a dialogue on farmer managed seed systems and agroecology, held in Acornhoek, Limpopo on 20-22 January 2020, farmers and support organisations made clear that they want to see more government and policy support for agroecology and farmer managed seed systems, that they will work together to engage government in this direction, and that they will continue to strengthen their work on the ground with the new connections that were formed at the dialogue. The rest of the document summarises the key discussions that took place at the Dialogue, but we start with the key priorities for action that emerged from those discussions.

Key Priorities for Action

Participants acknowledged this was a first engagement – in itself a useful achievement. To maintain momentum it is important to focus on initial key steps. Participants identified four key action areas:



1. Capacity Building

As part of strengthening a collective approach, capacities should be strengthened on issues related to farmer managed seed systems and agroecology:

- Deepening knowledge of the link between farmer managed seed systems, agroecology, climate change and the food system, to inform farmer support programmes.
- Deepening technical knowledge of seed: for example, the differences and similarities between hybrid, open pollinated variety (OPV), organic, traditional, indigenous and locally adapted seed, diverse and effective ways of treating seeds to protect them against pests (natural versus chemical). This will enable farmers to improve quality control in seed production where necessary, to better interrogate the seed they receive from government, and to clearly articulate their needs.
- Practical training on seed management: saving, storage, how to harvest a range of seeds (grains to vegetables).
- Farmer to farmer learning exchanges on agroecology and seed saving.
- Building up knowledge and action around consumption: sharing with each other on preparing traditional foods, for example. This also linked to raising civic awareness on food issues, to bring communities/consumers more into the discussion and activities.



2. Advocacy

An advocacy group was formed initially to be coordinated by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD). This group was tasked with the following:

- Develop a position statement from the dialogue.
- Use this statement to inform a meeting with Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD), to engage government officials further on the provincial process and to report the outcomes of the dialogue to them.
- Follow up with the LDARD on support to agroecology farmers.
- Develop a process for ongoing engagement with provincial government on policy issues.
- Engage government on land use zoning to incorporate small-scale organic/ agroecological production.
- Propose ways to bridge the policy gap between small-scale farmers and government.



3. Practical

- It was agreed that as this provincial work goes on, the wealth of work that people are already doing should continue, and lessons from this dialogue should be included in that work.
- Connections formed at the dialogue should be carried forward practically as well.
- Explore holding more localised meetings on seed.



4. Media

- Participants agreed to explore platforms to share information with each other.
- Produce communications materials for sharing, learning and awareness.
- Engage the media to publicise events and activities.

FARMERS' VOICES

“If you poison the seed, you are poisoning the food. You are poisoning the plant and interfering with the food system – if you don't have the wild, we are killing ourselves through the food system.”

MPHATELENI MAKUALULE



Background

From 2015 the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), together with a wider civil society network, responded to the promulgation of two draft laws that aimed to further support the large-scale commercial seed breeding sector. The key danger of them was that they potentially criminalised the saving, exchange and selling of seed by small-scale farmers. The Bills were passed into law in late 2018 as the Plant Breeders Rights Act and the Plant Improvement Act. An important development is that the Department of Agriculture is now working on exemptions from the regulations for small-scale farmers who are exchanging or selling seed up to a certain limit.

This is important, but the fact remains that the passing of the Acts indicates the continued importance that the government gives to the large-scale commercial farming sector, while the needs of small-scale farmers, and transforming our food system in the context of widespread hunger, climate change and biodiversity loss, remain within a framework that considers commercialisation as the only indicator of success.

Industrial agriculture is unsustainable. We therefore have to shift to agroecological systems for producing our food – systems that work with nature (rather than against it) and the values of human wellbeing and solidarity. A major part of agroecology is seed diversity, which ensures biodiversity in production, climate resilience, and good nutrition.

Supporting farmer managed seed systems and agroecology is increasingly being recognised by civil society organisations, researchers, farmer organisations and some policy makers. In light of this, ACB conducted scoping engagements across Limpopo Province in July 2019.



All-round agreement emerged on the need to organise a platform for further sharing of experiences and knowledge amongst the various stakeholders on farmer managed seed systems and agroecology, and how to take them forward, including building greater government support for farmers' initiatives. The ACB and AWARD therefore co-hosted a provincial dialogue meeting on farmer managed seed systems (FMSS) and agroecology on 20-22 January 2020. It brought together farmers, support organisations, and representatives from the national, provincial and local departments of agriculture into dialogue.

The objectives of the dialogue were to:

- Jointly reflect on the state of farmer managed seed systems in Limpopo.
- Understand the wider context, opportunities and limitations for FMSS in Limpopo, related to climate change, water, biodiversity, and global and national frameworks.
- Share information and learning from one another's practices around farmer seed systems.
- Engage representatives of the state on key needs and priorities for the state's role in supporting farmer-managed seed systems and agroecology.
- Develop an initial joint programme of action around farmer seed systems and agroecology.

This briefing contains the outcome of the discussions at the dialogue, as a document to guide joint work to advance support for the expansion of farmer managed seed systems and agroecology in Limpopo, and South Africa.

FARMERS' VOICES

“At the dialogue we were able to get information from everyone just from our day-to-day experiences. We are learning fast on what is going on. Instead of having one person standing there and dishing out knowledge, we learned from our own experiences. This enabled us to learn information fast, instead of just having one good guy with all the solutions.”

FARMER PARTICIPANT

Farmer managed seed systems, agroecology and the food system



Farmer-managed seed systems are those where smallholder farmers save, re-plant and exchange seed from previous harvests.



In these systems, smallholder farmers are active in breeding, selection, management, processing, storage and conservation of seed. Sharing, exchanging and enhancing seed by smallholder farmers has resulted in a huge diversity of seed and crops.



Diversity is very important to help farmers adapt to changes in climate, such as prolonged droughts. It also provides balanced nutrition for people and animals, feeds the soil, and is an integral part of agroecological production systems.

The dialogue deepened the exploration of farmer managed seed systems by discussing how having diverse seed is critical for a nutritious and sustainable food system, the importance of planting diverse food crops in the same field, and how talking about seed is inseparable from talking about the food we put in our bodies. This also means that farmer managed seed systems are a cultural practice, by rebuilding knowledge and practice around food and seed – “Knowledge is being lost, food sovereignty is disappearing.”

Seed Challenges and Opportunities

Taking forward farmer managed seed systems and agroecology is a critical task. It faces challenges, but also opportunities. Some of the challenges highlighted that we need to keep in mind include:

- Climate change is making it harder to produce. It will only get worse in Limpopo, and it will be really difficult to continue growing crops like maize. So we need to talk about expanding the production and knowledge of indigenous and locally adapted grains to replace maize.
- Small farmers at the dialogue said they and farmers in their communities currently get their seed from a variety of sources. Some who are linked with organisations promoting agroecology get seed from outlets like Earthwise that sell organic seed; farmers exchange seed amongst each other; some buy from local street vendors; and many farmers also buy the conventional seeds sold in supermarkets. A key challenge with regard to farmer managed or organic seed is bulk supply. If farmers are ploughing a bigger field, it is more challenging to get enough supply from own saved seed or from retailers selling organic seed.
- Government support is aimed at the industrial model of agriculture and seed systems (see more in the box below).

A session during the dialogue focused on organisations sharing the work that they are doing as it relates to agroecology and farmer seed. It is clear there are many organisations with capacity. The question is therefore about connecting our work more (such as through learning exchanges), connecting it more strongly to our wider communities where these challenges are experienced, and engaging those in government to understand these issues better.

The wealth of capacities amongst farmer organisations and support organisations includes:

- Seed saving and banking
- Maintaining natural soil fertility e.g. composting techniques and use of manure
- Herb production
- Holding farmer seed fairs and exchanges
- How to organise Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), where farmers who wish to sell agroecologically or organically produced food work with users/ consumers to monitor each other to assure that produce is organic
- Indigenous knowledge on nutritional and medicinal value of foods and plants
- Creating ecological calendars – a method that brings in indigenous and wider environmental knowledge and factors around food growing
- Policy research and advocacy
- Community development
- Land and land use zoning – important for planning wider agroecological and integrated production systems
- Interconnections between water, climate change, biodiversity and agriculture
- Government has supported community seed production, and a government representative indicated that supporting production of organic seed and wider varieties is an opportunity that could be explored



“Government is always ready and prepared to work with farmers. It’s important also to have platforms for farmer groups to engage government”

State of government support

Representatives from national, provincial and local government attended the dialogue and participated in robust engagement with farmers. They illustrated a willingness to listen, learn and engage with farmers. Farmers raised challenges that they experience with government:

- Lack of support for small-scale farmers
- Inappropriate support, such as provision of seeds that farmers have not asked for, and support for conventional farming rather than agroecology
- The lack of access to organic and indigenous seed
- Lack of support to small farmers building up their own farmer managed seed systems
- Government (specifically Local Government through their Local Economic Development (LED) programmes) does not seem to recognise the importance of small farmers to food security in South Africa, and how, if they were supported properly, through access to local markets etc., they could make an even bigger contribution

The LDARD made clear their willingness to improve working relationships with small farmers. For example, they have supported small farmers on seed multiplication and are open to work with other smallholder farmers in this regard. However, participating farmers still felt that the LDARD is locked into the paradigm of conventional farming. Like in the case of seed multiplication, seeds must still be like those produced by the commercial sector, treated with chemicals, and packaged in a certain way for them to be 'suitable' for market.

According to a LDARD representative at the meeting, the Department supplies seeds to farmers that those farmers have requested. But farmers noted that this is not their experience in practice – that the LDARD tends to bring seed that they seem to have already decided they will supply to farmers, which is often of a small number of crops and, in the case of maize, genetically modified. This seems partly to be linked to bulk procurement system. LDARD has to reach target numbers of getting seed to farmers, and rely on big companies who currently are the only ones able to supply the volumes needed.



Opportunities for multi-stakeholder activities

- Participants made clear in the dialogue that there needs to be a much more flexible approach, where government engages with farmers on their seed needs, from an agroecology perspective, and the system for procuring and distributing seed needs to be changed. Government supports smallholder farmers at the Gumbu Seed Bank in saving traditional/locally adapted seed, with plans to work on multiplication. This indicates potential opportunities to work with government further on exploring practical means to support farmer managed seed systems.
- While government still focuses on the importance of large commercial farmers for the country's food security, participants did say that there are spaces where agroecology and farmer seed systems can be supported. Beyond this, agroecology has the potential to make a bigger contribution to national food production and ecological sustainability. A further problem arises where government supports partnerships between commercial growers and small-scale producers through training and other forms of support where the commercial farming discourse dominates the outcomes of the process.
- The Genetic Resources Unit in the Plant Production Directorate in the national Department of Agriculture support work on indigenous and locally adapted seed through community seed banks and farmer seed and food fairs. There are opportunities to strengthen linkages between this work and provincial efforts on farmer seed systems.
- National Plant Genetic Resources Plan – the national Department of Agriculture has a plan for conserving diversity, including seed, in agriculture. Opportunities can be explored for civil society-government collaboration to take forward relevant parts of the plan in Limpopo.
- Civil society needs to clarify messages and positions and organise more strongly, to push a coherent message to government so that they are aware there is demand from the ground for policies and programmes that support agroecology production and seed systems.
- How government supports communities in terms of seed is bound by existing seed laws – hence the work should be linked to review and adjustment of laws and policies where necessary.

About ACB

The African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) works with others to learn about, and build support for, farmer-managed seed systems in South Africa.

Our objectives are to:

- Open spaces for smallholder farmers to advocate for themselves
- Inform decision makers,
- Make evidence-based proposals about the types of support required, and
- Share lessons from practice and reflection to a wide range of audiences.



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