

Farmer-managed seed systems in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Introduction

This briefing highlights key issues and opportunities that emerged from a field visit by the African Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) in Limpopo Province in July 2019. The intention of the visit was to:

- Identify the material base for future work in Limpopo.
- Engage with farmers and other relevant stakeholders to exchange views on:

- key priorities for smallholder farmers in South Africa
- the role of seed
- ideas for public sector and donor resource allocation, and
- practical ways forward.
- Support smallholder farmers, especially youth and women, to take these issues into policy spaces.
- Build increased public and donor support for farmer-managed seed systems and agroecology.

What are farmer-managed seed systems?



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.

“This type of farming is very important because we don’t get sick when we eat these foods. No chemicals, no fertilisers. They are full of nutrition. This seed is also good for food. That seed [corporate seed] you can’t eat, it is covered in chemicals. We teach youth so they don’t forsake this food. Chemicals and those foods disturb our health. If you eat this food, it gives you wisdom.” FEMALE FARMER, DZOMO LA MUPO

State of farmer-managed seed systems in Limpopo

Through engagement with civil society and small farmer organisations in the province, we found:

The conventional model of agriculture is dominant, along with the use of commercial seeds bought from 'NTK' or provided by the government, especially for farmers producing for the market,

BUT

Elements of farmer-managed seed systems do exist, particularly for crops being produced for home consumption, like maize, melon, nuts and beans.

AND

There are organisations and initiatives, such as Dzomo La Mupo, Gumbu Seed Bank and the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD), that are working to support smallholder farmers in saving, storing and exchanging a range of their own seed,

THEREBY

Reviving the use of indigenous and traditional seeds, together with associated knowledge, cultural identity and nutritional practices.

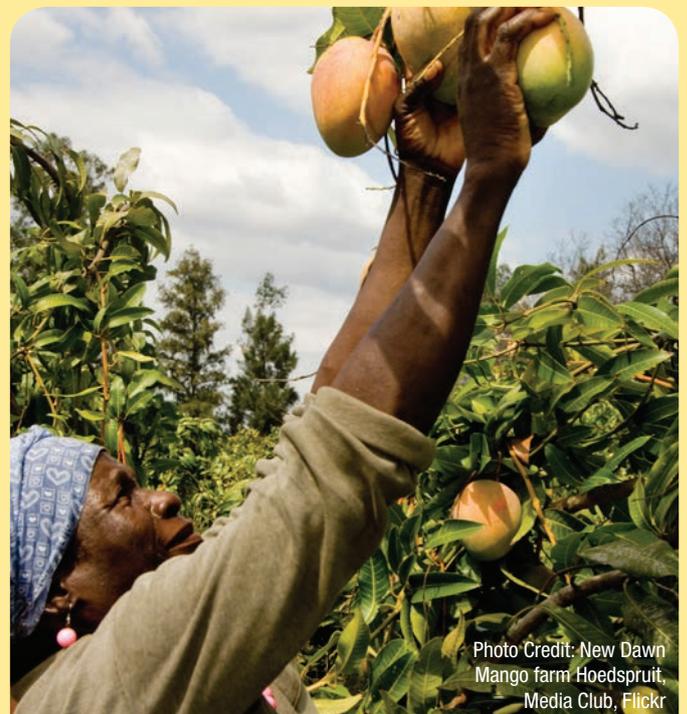


Photo Credit: New Dawn
Mango farm Hoedspruit,
Media Club, Flickr

Context

- Most of South Africa's food is produced by large-scale commercial farmers practicing industrial agriculture. Our seed systems, dominated by a few large corporations, are geared towards this model of production.
- Most government policy supports the reproduction of this large-scale system. For example, government recently passed the Plant Improvement Act (PIA) and the Plant Breeders Rights Act (PBRA), both of which are designed to meet the interests of private (and corporate) plant breeders and seed producers with little regard for farmers' seeds, farmers' rights or farmer-managed seed systems.
- Industrial agriculture is unsustainable. It is a major cause of greenhouse gas emissions, a heavy user of water and energy, and a primary contributor to biodiversity loss.
- The most appropriate response is agroecological production systems that work with nature (rather than against it) and that value human wellbeing and solidarity.
- Seed diversity is a major part of agroecology, ensuring biodiversity in production, climate resilience, and good nutrition.
- Dispossession and lack of support have resulted in erosion of farmer-managed seed systems and smallholder agricultural systems. However, pockets of farmer seed activities still exist. To meet South Africa's future food and livelihood needs, farmer-managed seed systems should be recognised, supported and protected.

“Remember, when we go to these farmers they are being made to believe that their own seed is inferior, or their own farming system is not good enough. So we need to work on what they are doing, it is good for the environment, for their socioeconomic status, so on. And on the other side, as government, national as well, [it] is to create an environment where these systems are promoted.” LIMPOPO DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT (LDARD) OFFICIAL

Challenges to expanding farmer-managed seed systems in Limpopo

State of knowledge and practice

Much of the knowledge and practice of farmer-managed seed systems has been eroded. This is the result of our history of dispossession and the marginalisation of agriculture as a means of livelihood.

Role of government

There is a general dissatisfaction at the role of government. Many explained that government support is limited to:

- Handing out fertiliser and commercial and genetically modified (GM) seeds
- An industrial agricultural model that simply wants small farmers to produce like large commercial farmers.

YET

Many organisations and smallholder farmers would like to see government respect and support their work, without trying to co-opt or confuse them.

Conversations with officials from the LDARD revealed they are aware of problems with government's approach. There is a willingness to talk about and explore alternatives like agroecology and farmer-managed seed systems.

“As Limpopo we are suitable, to say how do we learn from this and link things up? It just needs to become a project proposal that we put together. From where I am as my Department, we need these sort of partnerships... It will take some resources and time to pull this together, but we can do it.” LDARD OFFICIAL

Markets

Where preservation and revival of indigenous seed is taking place, it is mostly around production for household consumption. This is very important for household and local food security

BUT

Farmer-managed seed systems could be stimulated if there was also a wider demand for these crops

THEREFORE

Promoting and popularising diverse crops, and providing support for market infrastructure and the ability to get produce to market are important issues.

“We are serious farmers of these practices. We want a market, there is no market. We have a lot of produce.” FEMALE FARMER, DZOMO LA MUPO

Declining practices

There is a widespread feeling that a challenge in growing farmer-managed seed systems is declining interest in agriculture, especially amongst younger people.

Pockets of seed practices that build farmer-managed seed systems exist, but these require more assistance to be scaled up and out. Most important is to support agroecological production, markets etc.

“We want people to eat quality food- food with life - not food that destroys life. We want this in abundance so that we can be helping other farmers and other individuals who could come and buy.” FEMALE FARMER, MOPANI FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

“Whether in irrigation fields or dryland fields, we would like to see our own indigenous seeds being cultivated, because they are healthy and they are cheap, they make life affordable to our people.” FEMALE FARMER, DZOMO LA MUPO

Moving forward

Everyone expressed a desire to participate in a process focused on farmer-managed seed systems in the province. Initial priorities include:

- The need to understand more about the **wider context** of seed systems, such as existing seed legislation the global context, and the practical implications of these for smallholder farmers.
- Interest in learning from the **practice of others** (such as seed banks), through dialogues, exchange visits and so on.
- The need to interrogate approaches to **marketing**, including the role of health and nutrition education, in stimulating demand for more diverse and healthy food, and so farmer-managed seed systems.
- The importance of linking **cultural revival** and ways of being with farmer-managed seed systems and agroecology.
- Develop a common agenda to push **the state** to understand and support farmer-managed seed systems and agroecology.

“We must include government officials in the dialogues as well, to inform them as well. To wake them up.”

MPHATHELENI MAKAULULE, DZOMO LA MUPO, VENDA



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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