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ICARDA News

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African Seed Sector Challenges

Building Seed Systems for Greater Food Security through Partnerships

ALEPPO, SYRIA and JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA. 26 August 2002 — Food security in Africa depends on seed security, but in many countries seed supply is precarious. Coaxing the private sector to take up the challenge of supplying high quality seed of well-adapted varieties will require sound government policy and imaginative approaches. The Future Harvest Centers of the CGIAR are playing an important role in partnership with African national programs.

Why seeds?

Food security is a necessary component of poverty reduction, and for countries to be food secure they must be seed secure. But seed security is a challenge for many African countries, particularly those that suffer recurrent natural and/or man-made disasters. The restoration of productive agriculture after such disasters is a costly and difficult task for national governments and international relief organizations. Nonetheless, working together, the Future Harvest Centers of the CGIAR, national agricultural research systems (NARS), non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, and the donor community have successfully responded to disaster situations in Rwanda, Somalia, and, more recently, in Mozambique, through the Seeds of Hope program. The CGIAR played an active part in coordinating that response, which was implemented in collaboration with NARS from the region. Besides meeting farmers' immediate seed requirements, efforts were made to restore valuable genetic resources that were lost.

Key challenges

So what are the special challenges facing the African seed sector and what are we doing to meet those challenges? First, we must recognize the effect of risk, which forms a backdrop to much of African agriculture. Farmers are cautious about investing in inputs at the start of the season for fear of losing their investment if the weather turns bad. Next, we must consider the suitability of the varieties offered to farmers. Often these have been released with little regard to the complex needs of subsistence farmers, for whom yield is seldom the main consideration. Apart from yield, small farmers give importance to other attributes, such as byproducts, cooking quality, and taste. Finally, we must consider alternative systems that are potentially more effective in making seed widely available, particularly to smallholders located in remote areas. The seed needs of this group have not been adequately addressed by large enterprises. We believe that small indigenous enterprises with low-cost structures and close trustworthy relationships with the farming communities they serve are better suited to the task.

ICARDA maintains an active dialog with countries in Africa with regard to seeds

Power of partnership



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and food security. Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan were part of a study on seed security assessment in drought-prone areas, which was conducted between 1996 and 1998. The study was undertaken to find ways to mitigate food insecurity by restoring or maintaining the food production capacity of farmers in disaster stricken environments. These farmers are often at risk of losing all the seed they have, including indigenous varieties adapted and passed along for generations. ICARDA also contributed to international debates organized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 1997 and 1998 to formulate strategies and policies for improving seed security within the wider context of achieving food security.

Alternative delivery systems

In 1997, ICARDA also co-organized a workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe, with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), on Alternative Strategies for Smallholder Seed Supply. It was followed in 1998 by a workshop organized by ICARDA in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on the Finance and Management of Small-scale Seed Enterprises. The proceedings of these two meetings have been published and serve as valuable reference material in guiding project formulation and management in developing countries.

Strengthening human resource capacity

Weak technical expertise has constrained the development of seed programs in many countries, so ICARDA is working actively to strengthen human resource capacity. The Center's train-the-trainers program, workshops, and seminars have attracted participants from many African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Training covers the technical aspects of seed production and handling, policy, and business management, and is tailored to meet a country's specific needs.

Promoting information exchange

To promote the exchange of information and expertise, ICARDA established the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) Seed Network in 1992. This Network seeks to pave the way for increased seed trade that would generate enough demand to attract private investment and create a more diverse, competitive, and sustainable seed industry in the region. Such an industry could also be of great practical benefit in times of emergency when rapid movement of seed might be critical.

Policy implications

In most African countries, the seed industry is dominated by public sector seed enterprises, while private companies occupy selected markets. Establishing a more diverse seed system requires broader participation of the private sector to attract both domestic and foreign investment. In 2000, the African Seed Trade Association (AFSTA) was established to provide a forum for a more commercially oriented and dynamic seed industry. ICARDA contributed to debate on regional collaboration leading up to the establishment of AFSTA, which held its first congress in March 2001 in Cairo. The congress was a resounding success, attracting 262 delegates from 40 countries in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, USA, and the Middle East. Delegates discussed policy reforms required to mobilize the commercial seed sector. These included intellectual property rights, biotechnology, and biosafety regulations.

ICARDA's (www.icarda.org) mission is to improve the welfare of people and alleviate poverty through research and training in dry areas of the developing world by increasing production, productivity, and nutritional quality of food, while preserving and enhancing the natural resource base. ICARDA is a Future Harvest Center.

Future Harvest (www.futureharvest.org) is a global nonprofit organization that builds awareness and support for food and environmental research for a world with less poverty, a healthier human family, well-nourished children, and a better environment. Future Harvest is an initiative of 16 food and environmental research centers that receive funding from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).