

Civil Society & Regional Food Security

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Harmonising Seed Policies

Seeds and Food Security

The SADC Dar es-Salaam Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security commits governments in the region to "institute measures for the timely provision of quality seeds" among other necessary steps to increase production.

Improved seed supply is important on two levels. First, it can increase overall *production* and stabilize prices. Secondly, the use of improved seed can increase average regional yields, which are currently among the lowest in the world for cereals. Improved seed supply will thus ultimately improve the *productivity* of both farm labour and cultivated land, with direct benefits to household food security.

In most SADC countries, maize yields per hectare have remained stable (except in Zimbabwe and to a lesser degree Malawi, where they have declined). In an international context of increasing yields, this suggests SADC is producing well below its capacity. The restricted use of improved inputs, including irrigation, is a major factor explaining this poor production performance.

One reason for the relatively low use of purchased seed in the SADC region is that the overall costs are high when set against the risks of crop failure or low producer prices.

Seeds are also often difficult to purchase because of limited availability and distance to seed stores. Currently the development of seed markets that would improve access and availability is a priority for all governments in the region.

The Regional Dimension

The reason why the supply of seed and the development of seed markets is a regional issue is because of the nature of the industry itself and the importance of barriers to trade within SADC.

The seed industry is largely dominated by international companies that invest not only in production and distribution but also in research, training of agents and field extension. Such companies are less willing to invest in small or fragmented markets that offer few economies of scale. Barriers to trading in seeds within SADC appear to have constrained the development of the seed industry.

These barriers are not generally due to the deliberate protection of domestic markets within SADC. Rather, they are the consequence of differences in regulatory frameworks within all SADC member states.

All member states, with the exception of Namibia and Lesotho, have legislation in place for the seed trade.



The case for the removal of regulatory barriers to trade in seeds has been made not only by the companies but also by several of SADC's partners, including the FAO and (in collaboration with FANRPAN) the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT).

There are three specific areas where action is proposed:

Seed Releases

When new seed varieties are developed they are subject to investigation before official approval is given by Variety Release Committees (VRCs).

At present in SADC, most countries have their own procedures for testing, registration and release. And if these are strictly applied, there can be several years of delay before a variety is released, even if it is already widely used in a neighboring country with identical agro-climatic conditions.

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This is not only unhelpful to farmers and costly to governments, but it also fragments the market thereby restricting investment.

Seed Certification

As with the VRCs, most governments have their own certification systems; and seed certification provided by one certification authority does not mean that other authorities within SADC will accept the classification and allow distribution.

Some seed may acquire international certification (via the Swiss-based International Seed Testing Association) but there are only four SADC countries with ISTA accredited laboratories and certification is relatively costly.

Seed Hygiene

The problem here is also of a regulatory nature. The movement of seed across borders requires a phytosanitary certificate that shows that the seed is free of pests.

This can be a time-consuming process and the case is made by companies and traders that more time than is necessary is spent on investigating for pests that are not seed borne or have no economic importance.

Harmonising Regulations

Some progress has been made on devising measures to address the harmonization of seed regulations. The SADC Seed Security Network has developed proposals for new common regional procedures on variety releases, seed certification and phytosanitary standards. Presentations have also been made by members of the Network to a meeting of the SADC Permanent Secretaries for Agriculture.

However, even if these proposals are agreed in principle, there is a great deal of work on legislative and regulatory reform still to be done at each national level to put them into operation.

In addition, it is not clear if government officials, given the pressure of other priorities, would necessarily give precedence to regulatory reforms that would limit their current fields of activity and authority at the national level in the interests of regional standardization.

The Role of CSOs

Should CSOs add their voice to the case for regional seed trade harmonization?

The benefits of regional harmonization are clear for the seed companies: faster release of new varieties, lower regulatory costs, higher sales. However, for farmers, it should also mean more availability, lower prices and better services.

In due course, it should also mean that seed stores are present in all small market towns across the region with a selection of improved varieties packaged differently for different types of farmers.

So far the pressure for reform has come mainly from CSO producer organizations such as the SA National Seed Organisation (SANSOR). Other CSOs, particularly Farmer Unions and agricultural NGOs have not, on the whole, been engaged in advocacy for regional seed trade liberalization.



It is possible, of course, that some of the members of unions and clients of agricultural NGOs do not see the availability of improved seed as a priority. But if there is a demand for greater availability of improved seed, evidence of such demands would clearly add to CSO pressure on SADC for bringing urgency to regional seed trade harmonization.

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