

Improving farmers' access to quality seed



Most farmers in sub-Saharan Africa plant their own or locally traded maize seed. So, both informal and formal seed systems need to be improved in order to achieve widespread pro-poor benefits from modern, disease-resistant varieties. Governments, the private sector and farmers need to work together to ensure that all can benefit.



Above: Seed stockists and farmers are just some of those set to gain from better access to new maize seed—which brings much better harvests. Photos: T. Stathers (Natural Resources Institute)

Improving use of quality seed

High-yielding, early-maturing, maize hybrids (UH615 and UH6303) have been developed, and are now being used, in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. Resistant to *Maize streak virus* (MSV) Grey Leaf Spot (GLS) and tolerant of rust and turicum blight (all of which can severely damage maize) they could benefit producers in similar areas across the region and indeed have already been approved for release in Uganda.

However, for poor growers to benefit from these technologies, governments need to work in partnership with businesses to improve seed systems and modify them to include the needs of poor people.

How can the private sector help and how will it benefit?

Private-sector players like input stockists, distributors and seed-supply companies must recognize that the very large numbers of poor farmers represent a huge market and that including them in their business plans can boost their profits. Such farmers, for example, cannot afford large bags of seed or other inputs. Selling a large number of smaller packages has been proven to increase turnover and benefit both farmers and business.

Businesses could also benefit from promoting their products in an educational way, e.g. through demonstrations, in combination with information leaflets about diseases or crop-management practices. Teaching producers the benefits of using particular seeds and how to detect fake or low-quality seed inspires confidence and has obvious benefits for both growers and their suppliers.

What can policy makers do?

- Encourage companies to improve the seed systems they operate in and work within local seed systems.
- Encourage stakeholders like farmers and seed stockists to form associations. These can then communicate their members' needs to larger supply companies and the government and feed back useful information.
- Recognize the importance of informal seed systems—most growers plant seed that they produce themselves, partly because they can't afford to buy it.
- Accept that poor farmers are capable of growing and storing good quality seed for planting. Providing the support they need to do this better would have a range of benefits, including the development of varieties suited to specific areas.

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What is the purpose of this brief?

This Policy Brief was produced to show that complex subjects can be explained very quickly and simply to busy policy makers. It is part of a series that showcases proven technologies, policies and new approaches in order to demonstrate the importance of high-quality scientific communication.

Through its Policy Brief and Pocket Guide series, Research into Use aims to encourage partners in both the developed and developing worlds to invest more in their communication efforts. Only in this way will useful technologies be widely adopted, helping the people that they were intended to help and contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

What is Research into Use?

The Research into Use Programme aims to do exactly what its name says—to get research findings into use by resource-poor farmers in the developing world. The natural resources research programmes funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) produced many significant findings over their 11 year existence. Research into Use is working to put these results into practice—in order to reduce poverty on a very broad scale in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

A key part of this work will involve helping partners to better understand how the promotion and widespread use of such research will help to cut poverty and boost economic growth.

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