

Working Concept: Seeds for Food Coalition: it's time for a collaborative approach¹

The Seeds for Food Coalition affirms that:

Now. Within our lifetime, enabling the seed security of small-holder farmers is doable and achievable. Many of the seed materials, know-how, tools and social capital exist within the seed and food sectors. Despite these, the food and nutrition security is being compounded by threats of unpredictable and more extreme climate hazards. Therefore, enabling farmers to access the widest choice of good quality seeds that respond to their specific needs and local circumstances becomes more urgent. Achieving seed security is an important step for the resilient livelihoods of small-holder, men and women, farmers worldwide. As stakeholders in the seed sector, we need to work together for diverse solutions to complex problems. Cooperation is important as not a single country, nor seed system, is fully self-reliant on seed (for all crops) or plant genetic resources for its food and agriculture. The objectives of the Seeds for Food Coalition are to: (i) enable farmers to continuously choose and access the diversity of seeds for their complex needs and preferences; (ii) mobilise support for the development of vibrant and inclusive seed sectors to sustainably and equitably develop seeds catering to the diversity of farmers and agri-food systems; and (iii) reach out to the wider food, health, environmental and financial sectors raising awareness on the vital link of the sustainable and equitable seed system for the agri-food systems transformation. The Seeds for Food Coalition believes that seed secure farmers are vital for the resilience of our global food systems.

The UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) aimed to launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each of which relies to some degree on healthier, more sustainable, and equitable food systems. 718 million people living in extreme poverty starkly illustrates that our food systems need to accelerate the transformation to healthier, more sustainable, equitable and resilient food systems². Environmental degradation, food loss and food waste, and malnutrition further demonstrate the need for a transformative agenda. In addition, climate change emphasizes the urgency of such transformation. A transformative agenda for sustainable and equitable food systems needs to go hand in hand with equitable and sustainable seed systems, because seeds and food are intrinsically linked. In a continuous cycle, we grow our food from seeds, and we get our seeds from our food. Food systems have the power to bring diverse people together: the youth, indigenous peoples, families, rural and urban communities, and public, non-governmental, and private actors.

Initiated by the Netherlands³, the International Seed Federation⁴, Plantum⁵, and with the Seeds to Food Dialogues⁶, organized by UNFSS Food Champion Andrew Mushita of the Community Technology

¹ Approved Version 12/07/2023

² Poverty and shared prosperity 2020. Reversals of fortune. Report of The World Bank Group 2020. [https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34496/9781464816024.pdf 2](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34496/9781464816024.pdf?2)

³ [Development cooperation | Government.nl](#); [Vision Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality | Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality | Government.nl](#)

⁴ [Plant Breeding – International Seed Federation \(worldseed.org\)](#)

⁵ [Plantum is the Dutch trade association for companies in breeding, propagation and cultivation of seeds and young plants](#)

⁶ [official-feedback-11594-en.pdf \(summitdialogues.org\)](#)

Development Trust in Zimbabwe⁷, and with the inputs from Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Mozambique and Malawi, we are a group of individuals and organizations who have actively consulted with a diversity of farmers and stakeholders worldwide in preparation for the food systems summit. In establishing the Seeds for Food Coalition, we have reached out, initially, to a few countries in Africa, to further develop the rationale, objectives and areas of work of the Coalition. Defining the agenda in an inclusive, participatory, and multi-country driven approach ensures collective ownership of the processes and outcomes.

The members of the Seeds for Food Coalition come from public institutions and private sector, UN, research organizations, farmers organizations, and civil society organizations; from the global North and South. We bring a diversity of perspectives and expertise; and we are united in our belief that seeds are an important part of the solution towards transforming food systems. In this working document, we present a common proposal for joint solutions and actions and intend to draw in more institutions and countries. Constant innovation and access to a diversity of good quality seeds, of the right species and varieties, are a prerequisite for all food production, and therefore, essential for food and nutrition security.

Combined with more sustainable agricultural practices, access to a diversity of good quality seeds contributes to increased and more stable yields and better-quality products. Moreover, the diversity of good quality seeds is one of the key pillars in making agriculture more responsive to the diversity of food systems; and in mitigating and adapting to challenges posed by climate change; e.g., tolerance to extreme temperatures, saline soils and new pests and diseases. In addition, seeds resistance to pests, diseases and drought can increase sustainability, with a reduced carbon footprint as an additional step towards the conservation and sustainable use of agro-biodiversity. Access to the right species and varieties is crucial to fulfil local dietary diversity, culinary and cultural preferences. And finally, a secured availability of healthy quality seeds is essential for all farmers, irrespective of their farming systems. Plant genetic resources are the basis for resilience and sustainability of our seed systems; while a vibrant and inclusive seed sector contributes to innovation, improved livelihoods, and economic development.

The seed value chains, comprising of public and private actors, farmers, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), need to work together towards immediate and long-term solutions to ensure accessibility of quality seeds, particularly for the small-holder farmers. Various technical, institutional, and socio-economic challenges must be overcome. Joint context-specific solutions need to be identified depending on the type of farmers, their agro-ecologies, economic status, gender, household needs and market opportunities for e.g., staple and vegetable crops.

There is no one size that fits all. Indeed, this means that a sustainable and equitable seed system⁸ must include a diversity of solutions (or layers), to ensure the contribution of seed to help achieve the SDGs. This requires multiple stakeholders to work together in a seed sector, recognising each other's strengths and challenges. It is therefore important that we respectfully and creatively remind all contributors of their shared values and goals, and the need to work together.

⁷ Reference CTD website

⁸ "The term 'seed system' is defined as the combined activities of actors, making use of plant materials and knowledge, that together are necessary for supplying seeds to farmers. A functioning seed system should sustainably enable farmers to have access to the seeds of their choice and purpose, of the best possible qualities, at the right price from the farmers' investment perspectives, and the right time. Farmers need access to seeds at the start of each cropping season, and with a longer-term perspective. All systems include aspects of breeding/selection, production/multiplication and distribution in more or less complex settings. These include the corresponding distribution of tasks between multiple operators, including seed policy development and implementation" (Louwaars and Manicad 2022).

Rationale for establishing the Coalition

With the drive towards sustainable agriculture; the past decades saw numerous programmes on seed sector development. These initiatives have drawn attention to the parallel operations of the formal and so-called informal or farmer seeds systems. There have been many calls for complementary and inclusive approaches.

The need for a joint engagement by the formal and farmer seed systems⁹ has been expressed by a number of countries in e.g., Africa where mixed seed systems prevail. As much as 90 % of farmers use farm-saved seeds. At the same time, these countries are also promoting the increased adoption of commercial seeds. The countries interviewed expressed the need to cater to both the formal and farmer seed systems with the establishments of seed policies and laws and the existence of national seed associations. Currently, many countries do not have the operational capacity to develop and multiply seeds. At the same time, they also expressed the need to support farmer seed system by enabling farmers to continuously access seeds of their choice and to help improve their seed management. Farmers support can also be extended by ensuring that plant breeding, seed markets and seed policies and laws are also responsive to the diversity of farmers' needs.

Aside from mixed seed systems in many developing countries, it is increasingly recognised that farmers may combine landraces and improved varieties. Farmers use different sources of seeds for different crops and varieties, and at different times and farmlands, based on seed availability, quality, cost and corresponding farmers' perspectives on opportunities and risks¹⁰.

Programmes have been established with various degrees multi-stakeholder engagement. Their activities ranged from: (i) seed conservation and management; (ii) varietal selection, enhancement and breeding; (iii) marketing and (iv) policy. Many of these programmes resulted to positive outcomes on farmers access to seeds, and corresponding good practices, tools, and policy advocacies. Cases showed that access to good seeds, coupled with sound agronomic practices, were a decisive factor in improving farmers' livelihoods and food and nutrition security¹¹.

However, such achievements have yet to be fully operationalised, sustained, scaled out and mainstreamed. Many technological advances in crop breeding, and driven-down prices in plant genotyping and sequencing, are still not reaching farmers. Gaps are emerging¹² where a great majority of farmers remain unsupported and seed insecure. In many low- and middle-income

⁹ "The terms formal and informal (or farmers') seed systems are commonly used to distinguish between seed systems. Farmers' seed systems are managed in all their components by farmers, whereas formal systems operate through professionals for each component, various aspects of which are commonly regulated. The seed production component is, however, performed by farmers, either on their own account or under contract with the seed enterprise. There are significant differences within both types of seed systems, and intermediate ones exist where some components are more formal, and others operated by farmers themselves". Louwaars, N.P.; Manicad, G. Seed Systems Resilience—An Overview. *Seeds* **2022**, *1*, 340-356. <https://doi.org/10.3390/seeds1040028>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹Oxfam Novib, ANDES, CTD, SEARICE 2015. Compilation of Submissions on Farmers' Rights for the Sixth Session of the Governing Body of the International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Addendum 1. [IT/GB-4 Bureau 1 \(fao.org\)](#); FAO 2022. Evaluation of the 3rd Cycle of the Benefit Sharing Fund of the International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Evaluation report ink: <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb8605en>

¹² FAO 2022. Proceedings of the Global Conference on the Green Development of the Seed Industries. <http://www.fao.org/3/cc1220en/cc1220en.pdf>

countries, seed sector development continue to lag behind; often in parallel with the prevalence of poverty in the agricultural sector¹³.

Whilst there is a level of increased appreciation with corresponding project activities, for finding complementarities for the joint engagement of the formal and farmer seed systems, such concepts have had limited applications so far. As yet, operational guidelines back up by empirical evidence, and viable models with demonstrable outcomes are wanting.

Better functioning seed systems are fundamental to the country's food and nutrition security; and this becomes more urgent as major threats are upon us. Climate change is resulting to crop failures, biodiversity loss and reduction in ecosystems resilience. Moreover, COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts and economic down turns further underscore and aggravate the crises, with the poorest becoming even more vulnerable.

The greater and more complex the threats for our food and agriculture; the bigger the need for diversity of seeds and plant genetic resources. However, despite the unprecedented challenges and the potential solutions that can be gained in the pooling of resources and expertise amongst the stakeholders in the seed sector, polarization has obstructed dialogues and cooperation. Singular solutions tend to be unilaterally prescribed for all the farmers in highly diverse context, needs and preferences. The agency of farmers, as also as entrepreneurs, needs to be seen, heard and supported.

The Seeds for Food Coalition believes that there is a huge opportunity today to build on a more collaborative approach, by focusing on empowering farmers to choose and access a diversity of seeds with a vision of enhancing the complementarities between the formal and the farmers' seed systems¹⁴. Not a single country, nor seed system, is fully self-reliant on seed (for all crops) or plant genetic resources for its food and agriculture. Given this global interdependence, facilitating the continuous access to plant genetic resources and innovation; ensuring that both systems function and complement each other; and ensuring that plant breeding takes place, are decisive for the resilience of seed systems and consequently, our global food systems¹⁵.

Objectives of the Coalition

The coalition aims to foster local to global advocacy and mobilize joint actions to support the complementarities of the formal and farmers seed systems; and to strengthen their inherent inter-connection with food. The objectives are to:

¹³ FAO. 2019. The State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, J. Bélanger & D. Pilling (eds.).FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture Assessments. Rome. 572 pp. <http://www.fao.org/3/CA3129EN/CA3129EN.pdf>. License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

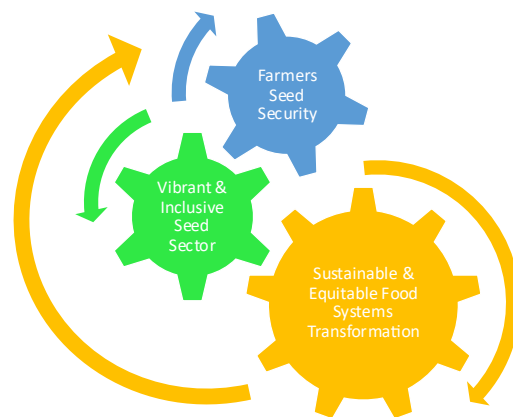
World Bank. 2021. The Changing Wealth of Nations 2021: Managing Assets for the Future. © Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/36400> License: [CC BY 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

¹⁴ See for example: FAO 2022. Evaluation of the 3rd Cycle of the Benefit Sharing Fund of the FAO's International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Evaluation report link: <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb8605en>
Oxfam, ANDES, CTDT and SEARICE. 2017. The power to exercise choice: Implementing Farmers' Rights to eradicate poverty and adapt to climate change. SD=HS Briefing Note no. 3. The Hague: Oxfam Novib

¹⁵ Louwaars, N.P.; Manicad, G. Seed Systems Resilience—An Overview. *Seeds* **2022**, *1*, 340-356. <https://doi.org/10.3390/seeds1040028>

- (i) Enable farmers to continuously choose and access the diversity of seeds for their complex needs and preferences;
- (ii) Mobilise support for the immediate and long-term development of vibrant¹⁶ and inclusive seed sectors to sustainably and equitably develop seeds, catering to the diversity of farmers and agri-food systems;
- (iii) Reach out to the wider food, health, environmental and financial sectors for awareness raising on the vital link of sustainable and equitable seed systems for the agri-food systems transformation.

Objectives of the Seeds for Food Coalition



The Coalition of the Willing

The Seeds for Food Coalition is a multi-institutional engagement, amongst organizations and individuals who are willing to embrace a diversity of perspectives and expertise; and are united in the belief that seeds are an important part of the solution towards transforming food systems. Our intention is to build a wider coalition, as we progressively take actions. We are also appealing to individuals who whilst representing their own institutions, are also willing to look beyond their institutional position to seriously (re)consider other perspectives; agree to disagree whilst seeking common grounds for joint solutions and urgent actions. We need to move forward together and work on complementary approaches.

Fundamentally, we have three working principles:

- (i) Respect for diversity, inclusivity and trust building. We serve to provide safe spaces, among multiple stakeholders to think, discuss, act and learn together. The Coalition will showcase

¹⁶ A vibrant seed sector reflects, for instance, the active engagement of diverse actors who cater to the diversity and changing needs and preferences of farmers world-wide. A vibrant seed sector operates within the whole seeds to food value chains, in innovative ways that are healthy for the planet and economies; and peoples' well-being.

that we can actually work together on the ground, by bringing our expertise and networks in support of Southern driven agendas.

- (ii) Add value to advance the Coalition’s objectives. We will learn from and avoid duplication with past and existing seeds programmes. We will fill in gaps as appropriate. More importantly, we will create synergies to advance, scale up and mainstream seed programmes. We will strive for viable and sustainable business models with immediate, medium term and long-term perspectives.
- (iii) Foster collective ownership through a joint agenda setting of the coalition of the willing; whilst supporting Southern- driven agenda. We will strive for co-creation, joint work and capacity building in engaging the member countries.

Focus Areas

The Coalition’s focus is on seeds; with a strong narrative link to agriculture and food systems transformation. The work of the Coalition is being developed in close consultations with the Southern partner countries, starting with Rwanda, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi. Specific country plans will be elaborated in countries. Broadly, the Coalition’s areas of collaboration will be focused on the following:

1. Key priority: Development/Facilitation of discussion (keystone approach) framework and platforms for constructive and inclusive dialogues, among multiple stakeholders to progress towards an equitable, inclusive, and sustainable seed systems that support farmers continuous choice and access to a diversity of seeds to meet their diverse needs and preferences. This includes:
 - Clarifying and visualizing operational models of sustainable and equitable seed systems in the context of agri-food systems transformation
 - Constructive discussions on new technologies, traditional knowledge and getting farmers’ agenda’s and societal concerns on board.
 - Networking and knowledge sharing amongst relevant stakeholders in the private and public sectors to support the development of the seed value chain and associated decision support tools, good practices and lessons learned

2. Enhancement of seed value chains through synergies in technological and institutional innovations¹⁷ in:

- Diagnostic and evaluative tools to understand and support farmers’ PGRFA management of field crops, vegetables and Neglected and Underutilised Species (NUS) and farmers’ demands for both traditional and modern varieties
- Increase understanding of different breeding approaches and their value for the farmers’ needs including participatory varietal selection in seed systems

¹⁷ Institutional innovation refers to changing the “rules of the game” e.g. policy and practice for navigating complexity; learning collaboratively; engaging politically; and being self-reflective (Woodhill in Almalki, H.A. and Durogbo, C.M. 2022. Systematic review of institutional innovation literature: towards a multi-level management model. *Management Review Quarterly* (2023) 73:731–785 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-022-00259-8>

From a seed systems perspective, institutional innovation could entail the full collaboration of actors from the formal and farmers seed systems enabling social change whereby farmers get to access diversity of good quality seeds that are e.g. bred for climate resilience.

- Building information tools and capacity building on breeding, multiplication and production of quality seed, utilizing both traditional knowledge and modern science
- Building bridges between private and public sector breeding and fostering collaboration in breeding efforts between the private and public sectors with the farmers.
- Seed management, including the optimal use of high-quality seeds, to enable farmers to improve productivity while also supporting seed systems adapted for local context and opportunities.
- Support for diverse and viable business models for local and domestic seed markets and trade; including public-private partnerships in finance and investments.

3. Support farmers' seed resilience to anticipate and plan for disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) in the context of climate change. This may include:

- Ensured supply and access to locally adapted quality seeds
- Use of PGRFA for climate adaptation in the context of regenerative agriculture
- Promotion of good practices in emergency aid
- Starting dialogues on developing pathways to wean over a prolonged seed emergency in food crisis countries¹⁸

4. Pursue enabling regulatory environment and policies and help ensure that these are implemented in an effective manner. Support the development of inclusive (diversity of seed sources) and enabling environments, that includes seed legislation, quality seed standards, variety release, plant variety protection, phytosanitary regulations, seed import, agricultural finance, and agricultural advisory and extension services. Supporting the participation of farmers in decision making and at the same time, support for business-driven environment for the development of national seed sector.

5. Facilitate advocacy, public engagement and communications. There remains a major gap in awareness of the vital link of seeds to food and agriculture. It is important for the Coalition to invest in communications within the seed/ agricultural sector; and to frame the narrative to reach out to the wider food, health, environmental and financial sectors.

¹⁸ FSIN and Global Network against Food Crises. 2021. Global Report on Food Crisis. Rome. Available at: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2021>