

Evaluation SeedNL 2021- 2023



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1. Introduction and evaluation method

SeedNL was established in 2021. The covenant underpinning this private-public partnership (PPP) will end per 31 December 2023. De 4 covenant partners, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)¹, the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), Plantum NL, -the branch organisation for the sector of seeds and vegetative starting materials-, and the Netherlands Potato Organisation (NAO), expressed their intention to continue SeedNL. To learn from the recent past and adapt for the near future, the Board of Directors commissioned an evaluation which covered the period 2021 – Q1 2023². Asking if SeedNL is or has the potential to become a real public-private partnership? What its' realm is or ideally should be? If it can claim to become that one place for advice?

Therefore, key research areas have been:

- The results and the impact of SeedNL as a public-private partnership, (towards realization of the) SDG2 objectives and their relevance for the different beneficiaries.
- The identity and added value of SeedNL
- The efficiency and efficacy of the way SeedNL is governed, organised, and supported (including financial support).
- The quality of the contributions of the different partners.

The evaluation, as indicated in the Terms of Reference, was forward looking. Identified lessons lead to recommendations for the future of SeedNL on ambitions and on modalities.

Evaluators were Gerard Meijerink (expert seed sector) and Adrie Papma (expert public-private partnerships for food systems transformation; lead). The evaluation existed of a desk study and interviews with 35 stakeholders (see annex 1).

This report presents the results and lessons learned, some relevant trends and ends with conclusions and recommendations on realm, ambitions, objectives and beneficiaries, partners, activities, communication, covenant, governance, organisation & embedding and resourcing.

2. Results and lessons learned

What is SeedNL and how does it work?

The global community, is committed to end extreme poverty and hunger in 2030, as expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Seed and starting materials are important agricultural inputs for farmers to increase their production and income. A well-functioning seed sector also supports the transition to sustainable food systems. As a world leader in vegetables and potato breeding, the NLS seed sector together with some relevant knowledge institutes and civil society organizations, can support countries in the Global South to achieve more and sustainable food production, to ban hunger, malnutrition and extreme poverty. Therefore, and according to its' Covenant, SeedNL was established by Dutch actors, to "explore how the seed sector in developing countries can be strengthened and where possible in upcoming markets".

Its objective is to increase the availability of, access to and use of quality seed by and for farmers in vulnerable regions of the Global South. Most of them are smallholders. Women make up well over 50 percent of the agricultural labour force in many sub-Saharan African countries. Quality seed may concern plant varieties developed by Dutch plant breeders and/or seed companies, as well as improved

¹ More specifically, the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) with its minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, part of the Dutch MoFA, is the covenant partner. In this document we will refer to it by using MoFA.

² Facilitated by NFP

local varieties that are available for growers in a semi-formal or informal seed system. SeedNL is supposed to address all sub-systems.

SeedNL, broadly spoken, consists of, firstly partners working together in two flagship programs in Ethiopia and Nigeria. Of a secretariat (1 fte director and 0,4 fte expert, plus structurally 0,4 NFP support for events, communication and project management). A supervising Board of Directors (BoD) who are representatives of the 4 covenant partners and their account managers. And a Sounding Board (SB) of approx. 20 relevant Dutch stakeholders, - companies, civil society organisations and knowledge institutes who participate in the SeedNL-supported programs/projects and of the 4 account managers. SeedNL was brought under the umbrella of the legal entity of the Netherlands Food Partnership (NFP).

During the interviews when asked to define SeedNL, there was reasonable congruency in the answers with reference to the above mission and objective. Some remarks were made on the efficacy and efficiency of the limitation of the core of SeedNL to Dutch actors only.

SeedNL supports mapping of the seed system in specific countries to identify the crucial system gaps/underperformances. For that, it applies principles of the Integrated Seed Systems Development approach (ISSD). SeedNL helps with the composition of coalitions and with their strategic approaches to address these gaps. The coalitions look for funding of their plans. The coalitions may include NL and/or knowledge institutes of the countries concerned, companies, consultants, government departments, seed associations, civil society organisations etc. SeedNL focuses on a limited number of flagship countries. Besides, it ad hoc supports and funds projects that aim to improve the seed regulatory environment in countries by means of the Seed Laws Toolbox (SLT). Finally, it organizes network and knowledge events, meetings, webinars etc. mainly for the Dutch seed community.

History and output so far

The history of SeedNL can be characterized by initial enthusiasm in 2021, followed by a dip and with a promising revival in 2022 and beyond. At the start, agreeing on the founding covenant took long. As well as clarifying the relation between SeedNL and the Netherlands Food Partnership (NFP), due to, - to a certain extent -, a forced marriage and differing opinions on the role of the latter: back office only or place of cross fertilization and learning as well, with equally differing opinions on the level of independence of SeedNL. The laborious setting up of some operational basics (especially smooth financial flows) created stress, resulting in unfortunate staff leaves. COVID-lock downs did not help either. All together this resulted in a profoundly serious dip. Despite this, an organisational set up and a functioning back office were realised. Since a year, the refreshed SeedNL secretariat, building on these fundamentals, achieved a clear outside looking revival, well noticed by all. Standing out was the annual event organized by SeedNL at the end of 2022: it showed that SeedNL has a large convening power to bring representatives of many organizations and companies together around the central theme of “access to high quality seeds”. Also, the “brand” SeedNL has been established and creates grand expectations.

These two phases are reflected in the character of outputs of SeedNL. In 2021 reporting is on organizational achievements and sailing on the waves of already existing projects like the Nigeria flagship program. Since 2022 the emphasis is on outward looking activities and on an active agenda setting by the secretariat. What is lagging, possibly due to the difficult start and dip, seems to be the active engagement of SeedNL (covenant) partners in agenda setting which comes from the secretariat mainly.

Table 1. Overview of output SeedNL

2021 getting the basics ready	2022 - Q1 2023 opening the windows
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Board of Directors established ✓ Startup Sounding Board ✓ Launch of website and brand ✓ Startup Ethiopia-Netherlands Seed Partnership (ENSP) ✓ Scoping mission Nigeria-Netherlands Seed Partnership (NNFP) ✓ Co-organizer side event Open Dialogue UN Food System Summit 2021 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Participation in incoming mission ISSD Sahel ✓ SeedNL information session at Dutch agricultural counsellors meeting ✓ Co-organiser seminars incoming missions ENSP and NNFP ✓ 2 rounds Seed Laws Toolbox (4 completed and 3 running projects) ✓ NFP 2022 World Food Day table host ✓ 2022 First SeedNL Annual Event ✓ Presentation at Food4All Coalition (civil organisation) ✓ Information webinar FNS experts MoFA ✓ Webinar potatoes for agricultural counsellors ✓ Participation potato rassendagen Emmeloord ✓ Webinar Hybrid True Potato Seeds (HTPS) ✓ Publication Potato Seed Sector Development: 10 lessons learned ✓ Publication Guide for Designing a National Seed Roadmap ✓ Scoping Study and Round Table Egypt seed sector ✓ Scoping Study and mission Bangladesh seed sector ✓ Seminar RVO meeting seed sector development, advice on design of RVO approaches ✓ Co-organizer side event Water-Food at UN Water Summit 2023 ✓ Validation meeting MoFA/IGG supra national seed sector development Sub Sahara Africa ✓ Quick scan Dutch public investments in the seed sector ✓ Secretariat for the Seeds4Food Coalition

Flagship countries

The existing flagship country programs aim to strengthen seed sectors in least-developed, low- and middle-income countries, increasing the productivity of farmers. They are budgeted for, separate from SeedNL. The Ethiopia program ENSP is running for the first year with multiple NL companies trialling plant varieties and training growers in good agricultural practices to achieve optimum results from these improved varieties.

The Nigeria program NNFP exists longer and was built on already existing projects. First results are visible: demand for seeds of improved vegetable varieties is growing. The time needed for registration of new plant varieties is reduced from 3 to 1.5 years.

The initiatives like scoping studies in Bangladesh and Egypt could result in new flagship countries. This depends on the interest and energy of many partners, both in the countries concerned as in the Netherlands.

It is fully understandable that SeedNL initially sailed the waves on already existing activities in countries and tried to bring some coherence in different projects. However, for a next phase, a more pro-active approach, in line with the SeedNL mission seems appropriate. Such would start with a shortlist of countries where food and nutrition insecurity are high, and where the seed systems (formal, informal and hybrid) are poorly developed. This shortlist to be matched with the interest of *different* SeedNL partners for long term investments and to be communicated to the wider seed community to form Seed NL flagship partnerships. With the aim to support entrepreneurship in countries along the chain of seed production, storage, and distribution not only in formal seed systems, but also in the informal

seed systems. There may be less direct commercial interest for Dutch parties, but by doing this it will enhance the PPP-nature of SeedNL.

For knowledge management, which is a core function of SeedNL, diversity in flagship countries will better address the need for learning and best practices in line with the mission and main objective of SeedNL. Also, knowledge management on exit and handover strategies to regular regional, national, and international (Dutch) actors, is recommendable. Such a knowledge coordination with SeedNL should be integrated in the flagship programs and budgets.

Seed Laws Toolbox

The Seed Laws Toolbox with an annual budget of €150K, supports projects to improve the seeds regulatory system (variety registration and listing, DUS-testing³, seed certification). Recently the second round of project-proposals has been granted. In the second round more attention went to the broader scope of the seed sector in the Global South where many smallholder farmers for their seed inputs depend on the informal sector. SLT-projects run independent of the flagship countries.

Interviewees appreciated the facility and commented that in the first year, the application and selection process was rushed and not transparent. This improved in 2022. In the coming years, the efficacy of the toolbox can be further refined such as in application and selection, in the (financial) space for follow up steps and in the synergy between initiatives supported by the SLT and emerging flagship countries.

Final observation on output

Many interviewees emphasized that SeedNL has the potential to but is not yet there. Remarkably, when asked for (desirable) activities, 'SeedNL' narrowed inconspicuously down into Secretariat (initiated) activities only. All interviewees, in varying degrees, showed willingness and have an interest to make the potential happen in the coming years, but need to take initiative themselves and stimulation to become really involved.

Mission, ultimate beneficiaries, and systems approach

According to the Covenant, SeedNL aims to increase the availability of, access to and use of quality seed by and for farmers in vulnerable regions of the Global South and where possible in upcoming markets. Ultimate beneficiaries are all farmers who, in the mentioned vulnerable regions, are mainly small holder farmers. The goal is to increase their productivity and income. Analytically, SeedNL uses a seed systems transformation approach.

The interviews showed reasonable agreement on the mission of SeedNL and on the transformative system approach. However, different partners expressed different priorities which often can be traced back to not using the demand side of smallholder farmers (contrary to the supply side) as the starting point for analysis and priority setting and as a consequence, with little attention for the informal seed sector. Also, differences appear on assumptions such as the assumed trickling down effects of interventions to small holder farmers.

Currently the top priority of SeedNL is a functioning seeds regulatory system which is key for (foreign) companies to operate. The underlying assumption is that SeedNL will help bridge the gap between demand of smallholder farmers and supply of quality seed and knowledge by the Dutch seed sector. As this will widen the choice for farmers for quality seed of their preference. It was commented that SeedNL needs to better address how regulatory flexibility can be built into seed systems to engage farmers of *all* sizes and to facilitate listing of advanced varieties as well as locally developed more heterogeneous varieties/selections. The focus on formal system improvements risks that informal (or hybrid) seed systems improvements stay underexposed in SeedNL. This, while small holder farmers trade their seeds for 70 – 80% from the latter sectors.

³ Testing new varieties for distinctiveness, uniformity, and stability

The flagship countries, while not denying the importance of the above actions, emphasize the improvements in semi-formal and informal systems such as capacity building of local companies, government workers and financial support to growers. Civil society actors prioritize the improvement of local varieties and the simplification of their registration processes.

At the 2022 SeedNL annual event Dr. Agnes Kalibata, president of AGRA, challenged the Dutch supply side at a fundamental level by stating: help us and give us the knowledge to develop our own seed sector. Which initiated a valuable dialogue on issues of interpretation, relevance and feasibility of one's own "independent" seed sector, re. a seed sector for plant breeding, for seed multiplication and processing, for distribution? SeedNL was excelling here as that safe environment for contentious, crucial issues.

To conclude, it is not so much a change or refinement of the mission that needs attention, but much more to consistently apply it as the *compass* for any activities under the SeedNL umbrella and as *touchstone* for their impact measurement. The SeedNL secretariat, stimulated by a BoD, should explicitly take a steering role on consistently applying this to design and initiation, testing of assumptions, learning and impact measurement. By doing so, to highlight SeedNL as the breeding ground for evidence-based learning via case studies.

Focus

Focus can be achieved in diverse ways: such as above (where to choose the entry point in seed systems, which are called 'themes' in the Covenant), via choice of crops, via choice of countries.

The covenant (and later strategic documents) prioritizes 5 *themes* which are: to stimulate an enabling environment, to strengthen a local seed sector, to promote high-quality varieties and agricultural extension, to do capacity building and to strengthen seed sector stakeholder networks. What stands out when looking at the flagships programs and the SLT-projects, is a further focus on seed regulatory system, trialling of varieties and capacity building. It is recommended to *expand* the focus in practice to include the improvement of informal and semi formal seed systems in a systemic and coherent way. The secretariat can further stimulate this pro-actively.

There is a growing demand for nutritious but also healthy food items, partly due to urbanization. The Netherlands has knowledge and history in vegetables and potato. Most interviewees saw no big added value in broadening the *crops* scope, except for the inclusion of vegetable crops and species relevant for consumer food tradition in the countries concerned (e.g., pulses, eggplant, okra). Also, improvements to a seed regulatory system are better served by an overarching crops approach with an eye for specificities (e.g., for hybrid potato seeds). Some interviewees urged the secretariat to follow up the recommendations for a better inclusion of the potato sector in SeedNL.⁴

Taking the mission as a starting point should first lead to *countries* where food and nutrition insecurity is highest (and where the political situation may warrant a successful intervention), and second to where the Dutch seed sector can and wants to add value. Note the importance for partners of long-term perspectives and engagement. There seems to be sufficient overlap of countries of need and countries of interest by the different Dutch partners. It is more a matter of bundling energy and bundling of the right partners. It is recommended to deliberately include LDCs as well in the future portfolio of flagship countries. And to build evidence for the benefits or eventually limitations of partnership cooperation in both Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Lower Middle-Income Countries

⁴ Ref. Potato: contributing to food and nutrition security and stimulating employment and entrepreneurship through productive and sustainable climate-smart small-scale agriculture

(LMICs)⁵. Countries of preference, incidentally mentioned in the interviews and already investigated by SeedNL, like Mozambique, Bangladesh, Tanzania and Uganda are all LDCs⁶. A total number of 5 flagship countries seems a reasonable optimum between variety-for-learning and capacity. The secretariat is encouraged to play a pro-active role here.

Partners

SeedNL was formed by an inner circle of two Dutch ministries and 2 umbrellas of the private sector, who are covenant partners, and are represented in the BoD. The partners in the advisory Sounding Board are a second circle. So far, all are Dutch. A third circle can be seen in participants of flagship country programs, in SLT projects and in network and learning events. Participation here, is more diversified, - including people or organisations of the Global South -, but sense of belonging to SeedNL is limited.

Quite some interviewees pointed firstly, to the one sidedness of only Dutch representatives, and lack of any Global Southern smallholder farmers voice center stage. If this were there in a structural way, it would improve the chance for SeedNL to be structurally demand-responsive⁷.

Secondly, interviewees addressed the potential added value and underutilization of knowledge institutes and civil society partners. Both can provide interlocutors, with no commercial interest, for neutral roles towards for example (regional) government staff to improve trustworthiness, or for managing objective field trials⁸. Civil society partners can help to contact smallholder farmers. Also, thorough knowledge management of successful partnerships is badly needed by all, not in the least by companies. This is par excellence the expertise of knowledge institutes.

The Dutch two sidedness (and not multi stakeholder character) of the centre of SeedNL was questioned by those partners who are not covenant partner, which are civil society and knowledge institutions (and financial sector, but not interviewed). Consequently, - except for WUR -, they showed clearly less engagement. Ownership of SeedNL would be welcomed by them but is at present hardly felt.

For successful growing, quick and high germination also under sub-optimal conditions and protection against pests and diseases in young plant stage (through chemical or biological methods) are essential. Other Dutch companies than those presently connected to SeedNL, have much knowledge on processing, maintaining and enhancing the quality of seeds⁹. SeedNL can consider inviting these types of companies to join – for example in new flagship programs.

The overall conclusion on the supply side is that the full potential of what collective knowledge the Dutch seed sector potentially has to offer, is underutilized by SeedNL.

Identity, brand and communication

The website of SeedNL attracts approx. 5000 visitors a year¹⁰, on LinkedIn there are 1500 followers¹¹, webinars attract 20 – 25 participants; and the annual event 2020 attracted over 100 participants, while high interest is already showed at the pre-registration of the 2023 event.

Interviewees see the "brand" SeedNL potentially as powerful, from which all can benefit at the global stage. Communication efforts will be needed to come to its full potential. "SeedNL keeps itself small."

⁵ Ref. OECD/DAC ODA country list

⁶ Bangladesh appears also on the so-called 14 combi track countries for trade and aid of MoFA.

⁷ Also, the closer interviewees operated to concrete country programs, the more the participation limited to NL partners only was questioned: e.g., in some countries it may be more efficient to include French companies or experts.

⁸ Such as Fair Planet and Solidaridad

⁹ Such as Incotec, Germain, Hoopman, TEAL, Petkus, Seed Processing Holland

¹⁰ Of whom in 2022 3500 unique visitors

¹¹ As a reference: NFP has 4500 and NWP 13000 followers

The mission of SeedNL and its (hearsay) identity run the risk of lacking congruency which is potentially harmful. This, in an international environment where contagious issues, like on patenting, access and benefit sharing, GMOs and new breeding techniques, dominate global debates (and negotiations) and create stalemates.

SeedNL will need to communicate carefully balanced messages, on balanced packages of activities addressing gaps and blockages in informal, semi-formal and formal seed systems. The best communication of SeedNL is to produce evidence and show concrete cases where different partners, by working together, in different compositions and ways, and in various parts of seed systems, created better sustainable productivity and decent incomes for smallholder farmers in the Global South.

Functions of SeedNL

Interviewees appreciated various functions of SeedNL and recommended to continue and – where needed – to strengthen these:

Network

- Acting as a network platform such as experienced in the Sounding Board and in the annual event.

One stop shop

- SeedNL as a principal place for access to Dutch knowledge and expertise on seed systems.

Financial facility

- SeedNL offering a financial facility to address critical gaps in seed sector development, for example the Seed Laws Toolbox.

Knowledge products were not mentioned spontaneously and are unknown. Note that, so far, SeedNL produced limited ‘knowledge’ output (see table 1). It is recommended to further explore what knowledge sharing resonates best, especially with companies: guidelines, evidence-based cases, webinars and meetings.

When asked how to strengthen the added value of SeedNL in the future, the following functions were strongly promoted:

Guard and creator of a safe environment

- Be the guard according to the SeedNL mission, for all activities under its umbrella. Steer and if needed make partners to adjust with that legitimation.
- Be the ‘safe environment’ for the dialogue on sensitive issues and the practicing accordingly. Re. in the Sounding Board, in the BoD, and in the programming of events. SeedNL to provide a ‘safe environment’ to exchange views on controversial subjects as Plant Variety Protection (PVP), farmers rights, domestic high value vegetable varieties, biodiversity. Also, interviewees recommended SeedNL as a space where stakeholders listen and postpone mutual prejudices and where they dialogue on decolonisation (“The Dutch will fix it...”). So far, this function of SeedNL is underutilized, while not addressing such issues hindered, if not blocked collaboration in the past. The best learning approach seems to be by discussing concrete case studies. Make SeedNL into an inviting space for collaboration between parties with opposing views in concrete programs. As an output, produce position papers on these issues and publish¹².

Convenor of new flagships

- Be the convenor who consults about, identifies, designs and initiates partnerships accordingly. Larger scale initiatives could emerge out of this. Eventually facilitate access to other than Dutch financial resources.
- Gain ground to become the advisor/assessor of all Dutch public investments in Global South seed sector investments.

¹² A good example is the (2019) publication of Oxfam, Plantum and Euroseeds, MoFA and MoA “Can the exchange or sale of self-produced seed be allowed under UPOV 1991?”

Knowledge broker

- Become ever stronger in knowledge management, lessons learned, best practices. For that: develop strong links with flagship programs throughout execution phases and preferably with other (international) relevant programs as well¹³.

Especially the intensive roles of convenor and knowledge broker will be a serious challenge for SeedNL, certainly for the secretariat. Setting this up for success, requires extra investments in expertise and financial resources. Expertise such as Global South seed sector knowledge, and possibly some expertise on the relevant donor landscape. Capacity for knowledge brokering and communication should be expanded. The latter could be negotiated with NFP. Extra financial resources concern, amongst others, seed money for initiation activities for future flagship programs, re. scoping studies and missions.

Governance, organizational set up and resources

On paper, the governance of SeedNL underwent changes. Most debate and changes have been an expression of clarifying who is in power and who in charge.

The covenant was agreed by three partners, MoA, MoFA and Plantum. In 2022 NAO joined as a fourth partner. The original covenant defined 4 organisational parts: the Steering Committee (SC), the Technical Committee (TC), the Sounding Board (SB) and the Secretariat. The SC was composed of directors of the covenant partners, the TC by their account managers and the SB of Dutch relevant stakeholders plus members of TC. The SC was commissioned with decision making power, the TC with preparing the agenda, the SB giving advice and the Secretariat was tasked to support all mentioned bodies and to organise activities. Per separate process (not per the covenant) NFP accommodated SeedNL.

End of 2021, governance and organisational set up were recalibrated¹⁴, to simplify governance, to diminish micromanagement by the governance bodies and to clarify the relation between SeedNL and NFP. The Steering Committee was renamed Board of Directors, the Technical Committee formally dissolved, and its members later referred to as account managers, and the coordinator function of the secretariat renamed into Program Director. The SB was not changed.

As of then, the BoD was intended to provide strategic direction only and to require programmatic accountability from the secretariat. Account managers appointed within their own organisations were to function as first point of contact for the Program Director for consultation and communication.

The relation SeedNL – NFP was further detailed: SeedNL to receive financial support from its funders via NFP and financially accountable to them via NFP. NFP giving financial, HR and administrative support for SeedNL. NFP to also support with its' own funds or capacities (within its' objectives and financial possibilities).

Currently, according to the SeedNL website, the BoD supervises and meets at least once a year. The account managers maintain oversight, have regular individual contacts with the Program Director and meet two to three times a year. The Sounding Board proposes agenda items and stimulates and identifies options for collaboration and meets at least twice a year.

Asked after their perceptions, interviewees commented on various aspects of the governance and organisation, mostly on role, composition of and potential conflicts of interest within the BoD, the role of the Program Director, the function and composition of the SB and the relation SeedNL – NFP.

Observations are:

- Three out of four bodies had (name) changes, finally ending up as Board of Directors, account managers and Program Director. Only the Sounding Board remained unchanged. Could this be because the latter is the single one with advising power only?

¹³ In this context is it questionable why the Community of Practice ISSD Africa doesn't operate under the SeedNL flag or isn't connected in any other way.

¹⁴ See SeedNL Governance 2022 with mandaten schema SeedNL, approved by SC. See also annex. 3 in this evaluation report.

- The development should be interpreted as a Program Director obtaining more space, with account managers taking a step back and Board of Directors governing on strategy level only. Interviewees saw this as a positive development: it leaves more space for initiative, decision making and mandate to the Program Director. Under the condition of good consultation and relevant expertise, interviewees appreciated a propositional and pro-active secretariat. Current one-to-one engagements of the director were much appreciated, as all partners asked for more attention for their realities. At the risk side, interviewees warned for loss of ownership of covenant partners.
- The power in the covenant is centralized within the hands of a limited number of parts of the so-called Dutch Diamond, which are the government and the private sector. With that, the supply side (in the supply – demand equation) is overrepresented. SeedNL needs to rethink its governance from the perspective of Southern demand voice and reinforcement of its’ multistakeholder identity. Combined, this leads to a much stronger Global Southern farmers’ voice. There are many modalities to do so, from light (e.g., stronger connect with Dutch agricultural councillors as interlocutor of Southern farmers voice; agenda setting in flagships) to medium (e.g., composition of partners in flagships, representatives, - possibly working in the Netherlands -, in the Sounding Board, composition of staff secretariat) to strong (e.g., their voice in the Board of Directors). To get somewhere in this process, it should be strongly steered by Program Director and BoD.
- Within the government, the two ministries MoFA and MoA are both wearing “two hats” towards SeedNL, one of donor and the other of covenant partner. MoFA acting more as a responsible donor, relative sharp in distancing itself from NFP and SeedNL, hammering on financial accountability via NFP and emphasizing the conflict of interest when BoD approves budget and plans of SeedNL. Whereas MoA is acting more as a responsible partner towards SeedNL and is in close connection with the two other partners Plantum and NAO. It is to be appreciated that recently both ministries offered comparable financing modalities to NFP, albeit with different duration.
- NFP – SeedNL relation. Most interviewees remarked the improved and clarified relation between SeedNL and NFP. None plead for breaking up the relation again. However, there is still tension on the extent to which the Program Director can operate independently and to the role of NFP being only that back office for SeedNL or that incubator and place of cross-fertilization for SeedNL. This goes back, if not is caused by (the perceptions on) the differences in the origin of both: SeedNL originating more from a private sector background and NFP more from a civil society background. This might be reinforced by how partners identify themselves and (thus) judge over the preferred identity of SeedNL and NFP. It is recommended to keep the relation as-is, and for the two directors to clarify their mutual mandates, to define options for cross-fertilization and to stimulate that the SeedNL Program Director will have maximum space to operate.
- The Sounding Board looks rather passive in name, activity and ownership of SeedNL. Here the flaw in SeedNL reveals itself quite clearly. Others than the covenant partners, certainly the other parts of the Dutch Diamond, notably civil society organisations, knowledge institutes and (from hear-say) financial institutions do not feel particularly engaged and/or feel overruled by the commercial participants and associations (with the exception of WUR). The evaluation did not reveal if advice was given by the SB, to whom and what was done with it. For example, the SB could advise on country selection, on the role of SeedNL in the improvements of the informal seed systems, on the optimal organisation of variety trials or on concrete best collaboration options for flagship programs.

Resources

SeedNL receives funding from MoFA and MoA, via NFP. On an annual basis, NFP receives approx. €4 Mn from those 2 ministries, in a 75:25% ratio. Of it, as an example, the SeedNL budget 2023 is composed of €450K (which includes 1,4 fte for director and expert; and includes the SLT budget; excl. VAT), plus 0,4 fte structural NFP support, plus incidental resources for the evaluation.

In the covenant it was agreed that Plantum would contribute in kind to the SeedNL secretariat. It is assumed that this agreement applies to the later joined NAO as well. Contributions, certainly financial ones, have been limited so far. However, both have expressed willingness to commit to the agreement. Some companies are favourable towards incidental financial support to concrete activities. Under condition that they have a say on the spending.

The additional functions for SeedNL (as mentioned above) will, at a minimum, require extra activities budget, estimated at €150-200k annually. Such a combined, annual contribution of all partners will strengthen and diversify the financial basis of SeedNL. These functions require also additional senior staff capacity with solid plant breeding/seed sector experience in developing countries. Secondments, up to 2 ftes, provided by the private sector, seem appropriate.

For extra investments in the 14 combi-track countries of MoFA, it is appropriate to further strengthen the relations with MoFA/DDE and RVO.

Linkages

Added value can also be reached by developing some relevant and practical linkages, either at core or at program level. This prevents SeedNL from mission creep. It is worth to investigate which financial providers could and would support in the SeedNL flagship countries by providing micro-credits and/or insurances to growers that would like to participate but are hindered by the lack of financial means to buy inputs as improved seed. Think of providers such as ASN Bank, Oikocredit, Triple Jump.

Collaboration can be sought with agricultural input providers (fertilizers, crop protection, biologicals, irrigation, beneficials, etc.) with expertise on good agricultural practices to grow crops with greater resilience under sub-optimal conditions.

Finally, legal advisors, such as the Georgetown Law Center on Inclusive Trade and Development (CITD) could be of much value in sharing information and ideas on seed regulatory systems.

3. Trends

Rapid urbanization in the Global South, creates a growing market demand for nutritious food, fresh vegetables and potatoes. This will stimulate the need of standardized, professional produce, and thus demand for quality seed.

Progress in plant breeding techniques (e.g., gene editing by means of CRISPR-Cas techniques) may also impact variety development in both main crops and orphan crops of interest for countries in the Global South. Besides technical aspects, this also impacts regulatory systems and societal debates for which SeedNL should be prepared.

International trade might face growing limitations, specifically for seed trade due to stricter ruling on such issues as biodiversity, phytosanitary measures, certification, market access. On the contrary, the regionalisation of seed laws (such as in ECOWAS) is expected to smoothen regional trade.

A larger part of the ODA budget of the Dutch government risks to be spent on asylum and reception, which will put downward pressure on other priorities such as food security.

SeedNL needs to rethink how to relate itself and the seed system development to global urgencies of climate justice, biodiversity, water availability and quality and the future of agriculture.

Also, global debates and processes of decolonization impact on how SeedNL is or will be perceived and how it wants to develop its own identity.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

SeedNL showed most output as of 2022. Before that, startup activities (and hick ups) absorbed most attention. Standing out are the flagship country programs, the SLT, the annual event 2022 and the branding of SeedNL. Remarkable is the relative unfamiliarity with products as guides and lessons.

Invest in a future portfolio of *various* flagship countries (including high food insecurity needs) and of addressing gaps and blockages in *various* parts of seed systems (informal, semi-formal and formal), congruent with the mission of SeedNL. Creating synergy between initiatives supported by the SLT and emerging flagship countries is to be applauded.

The mission of SeedNL on paper is unambiguously, in practice it needs consistent encouragement. SeedNL is drifting between improving the sustainable production and income of small-scale farmers via interventions in the seed sector and improving market access for Dutch seed companies. When these reinforce each other there is no contradiction, when not, SeedNL needs to choose for the former as its anchor, not the latter.

The mission of SeedNL and a (ISSD) system approach is supported by all. Challenges to be explicitly addressed are to apply the demand side of smallholder farmers consistently as a compass and touchstone for priority setting; to test trickle down effects; to aim for regulatory flexibility and to investigate the development of a nationally owned seed sector, including the capacity and infrastructure for regulatory oversight and support.

Keep the focus for now on vegetables and potatoes. Strengthen the attention for the latter. Include vegetable crops and species (e.g., pulses, eggplant, okra) relevant for consumer food tradition in the countries concerned.

Be selective in the number of flagship countries, with preference of the active identification of countries weakest on food and nutrition security. Set an ambition to grow towards a number of 5 *various* flagship countries in order to broaden the learning field of SeedNL and to deepen insights. Be prepared for a long-term engagement of SeedNL and partners with these countries.

The dominant partners of SeedNL are reflecting its bias towards the formal system and towards Dutch actors. Southern farmers voice should be strengthened to keep the right course. Different modalities can be explored.

Guard the congruency of the mission, with the brand and with the real activities of SeedNL. Communicate balanced messages, on balanced packages of activities, with balanced actors. Promotion can be done at the Centenary of ISFs World Seed Congress 2024 (Rotterdam, May 27-29).

Select a limited but ambitious set of functional areas for SeedNL, summarized as a convening space for collaborations, debate, networking, expertise, and knowledge. This will improve the added value, efficacy, and efficiency of SeedNL. Potential success depends on the level of resourcing.

Keep the governance and organisational set-up as-is with the following improvements:

- Rethink representation of Southern farmers voice; in the Board of Directors?
- Activate the Sounding Board – prioritize advices, where these go and what is done with them¹⁵.
- Keep the relation SeedNL – NFP and enrich with cross-fertilization for knowledge management.
- Maintain conditions for the SeedNL program director to have space and license to operate.

¹⁵ Eventually, change the name as well?

The role of the SeedNL secretariat should be that balancing act between consultation and facilitation on one side and being propositional and steering on the other side and at the same time. Expertise and money help both to become such a convening power.

It would help SeedNL to become a convening authority, if all covenant partners contribute with engagement, and with financial and expertise contributions to core functions. Suggested is an extra activities budget, roughly estimated at €150-200k annually and extra senior seed sector expertise (seconded; 2 fte).

Some selective, active linkages can be developed to add value. Recommended are with seed technology providers, agricultural input providers, on financial services, and juridical expertise.

It takes 10 years to develop one new plant variety. It will take more than 10 years to develop a well-functioning seed system that will result in full and easy availability of quality seed for smallholders in the Global South. Could a next version of the Covenant express that knowledge and long-term commitment?!

Annexes

Annex 1. List of interviewees

1. An Michielsen	SeedNL, former coordinator
2. Anke van den Hurk	Plantum, deputy director international affairs
3. Babette Bodlaender	SeedNL, staff
4. Boudy van Schagen	KIT, senior advisor agriculture
5. Bram Wits	MoA, agricultural counsellor Ghana/Nigeria
6. Chinedu Agbara	Sahel Consulting - Nigeria Netherlands Seed Partnership, coordinator
7. Dick Hylkema	NAO, director
8. Frejus Toto	ACED Benin – Seed Laws Toolbox beneficiary
9. Gerard Backx	HZPC, ceo
10. Heleen Bos	Rijk Zwaan, account manager organics
11. Ingrid Flink	MoA, senior policy advisor international agribusiness
12. Ivo Demmens	NFP, director
13. John Belt	SNV, global technical advisor inclusive value chains
14. John van Ruiten	Naktuinbouw, director
15. Karst Weening	NAO, director
16. Kim van Seeters	MoA, senior policy advisor
17. Marien Valstar	MoA, senior policy advisor
18. Marja Thijssen	WUR, senior advisor agrobiodiversity and seed systems
19. Melle Leenstra	MoA, agricultural counsellor Egypt
20. Michel de Bruin	Agrico, manager business innovation and development
21. Mohammed Hassena	Ethiopia Netherlands Seed Partnership, coordinator
22. Myrtille Danse	NFP, former director
23. Niels Louwaars	Plantum, director
24. Nout van der Vaart	Oxfam, policy lead food and land
25. Orlando De Ponti	seed expert
26. Peter Gildemacher	KIT, senior advisor sustainable economic development
27. Pim Lindhout	Solynta
28. Ralf van der Beek	MoA, MT member EIA
29. Rob de Vos	SeedNL, chair Sounding Board
30. Rutger Groot	East-West Seeds, board chairman knowledge transfer foundation
31. Tien Hoang	RVO, advisor private sector development
32. Vincent van Bentum	Fair Planet, NLS secretary and board member
33. Wijnand van Ijssel	MoFA, senior staff IGG
34. Willem Schoustra	SeedNL, program director
35. Wouter Bakker	EASI Seeds, entrepreneur

Annex 2. Consulted documents

Agenda and minutes of BoD, SB, account managers, 2020 – 2023 (where available), SeedNL

Annual Plans 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, SeedNL

Annual Reports 2021, 2022, SeedNL

Application form Seed Laws Toolbox, SeedNL

Can the exchange or sale of self-produced seed be allowed under UPOV 1991?, Oxfam, Plantum Euroseeds, 2019

Convenant Samenwerkingspartners SeedNL, Staatscourant, March 2020

DAC List of ODA Recipients, Effective for reporting on 2022 and 2023 flows, OECD/DAC, 2022

ENSP Newsletter, SWR Ethiopia, July 2022

Gender and seed entrepreneurship: Case studies in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania, CGIAR, 2021

Guide for designing a National Seed Road Map, WUR/WCDI, 2023

ISSD Guiding Principles, ISSD Africa

Laws and regulations enabling and restricting Africa's vegetable seed sector, International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability, 2023

Mapping of donor activities in the seed sector within Nigeria's national seed road map Framework, CSP, 2022

National Seed Road Map for Nigeria, WUR/WCDI, 2020

Potato Seed Sector Development: 10 key lessons learned, SeedNL, 2022

Potato: contributing to food and nutrition security and stimulating employment and entrepreneurship through productive and sustainable climate-smart small-scale agriculture, discussion paper, June 2021

Project summary Ethiopia-Netherlands Seed Partnership, WUR/WCDI

Role and position SeedNL 2023 and beyond, discussion paper, June 2022

Scoping Study for a Seed Laws Toolbox, WUR/WCDI, 2020

SeedNL Governance 2022 and mandaten schema, November 2021

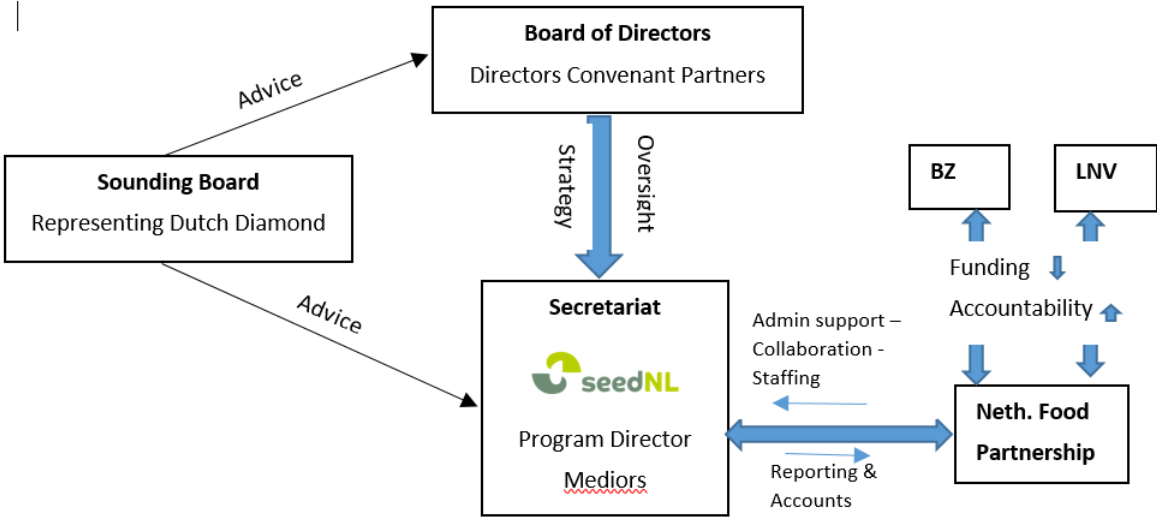
SeedNL-Report of round of interviews with members of Plantum, 2018

Using Regulatory Flexibility to Address Market Informality in Seed Systems: A Global Study, Agronomy, 2021

Website SeedNL

Annex 3. SeedNL governance and organisation in a figure

Figure 1. Governance structure SeedNL¹⁶



¹⁶ Adopted from SeedNL Governance 2022

Annex 4. List of abbreviations and acronyms

AM	Account Managers
BoD	Board of Directors
CITD	Georgetown Law Center on Inclusive Trade and Development
DDE	Sustainable Economic Development Department
DGIS	Directorate-General for International Cooperation
DUS	Testing new varieties for distinctiveness, uniformity and stability
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ENSP	Ethiopia Netherlands Seed Partnership
FNS	Food and Nutrition Security
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GMO	Genetically Modified Organisms
HTPS	Hybrid True Potato Seeds
IGG	Inclusive Green Growth Department
ISSD	Integrated Seed Systems Development
MoA	Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food
MoFA	Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NAO	Netherlands Potato organisation
NFP	Netherlands Food Partnership
NNSP	Nigeria Netherlands Seed Partnership
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee
Plantum	NLs branch organisation for the sector of seeds and vegetative starting materials
PPP	Public Private Partnership
PVP	Plant Variety Protection
RVO	Netherlands Enterprise Agency
SB	Sounding Board
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SLT	Seed Laws Toolbox
TC	Technical Committee