

# AFRICA'S LOW-HANGING FRUIT



Akello Brenda, a woman farmer from Amuru, Uganda, harvesting sour sop. Credits: ESAFF Uganda

## HOW SUPPORT FOR FARMER-MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS PAVES THE WAY TOWARDS RESILIENT AND DIVERSE FOOD SYSTEMS IN AFRICA

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[seedsforresilience.org](https://seedsforresilience.org)

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### KEY MESSAGES

- Farmer-managed seed systems are **essential to providing food and nutrition security** to smallholder farmers across Africa yet significantly **lack policy support** and investment.
- Implementing policy measures to support farmer-managed seed systems contributes towards **the fulfilment of several national and international policy objectives**.
- Measures that policymakers can implement include support for community seed banks, participatory plant breeding, decentralised quality control, and **legal space for farmers** to produce, exchange and market their farmers' varieties.
- Farmers should be included in the **relevant decision-making processes** and seed sector governance on local and national levels, and their **management over genetic resources, knowledge and data** should be respected and strengthened.

# INTRODUCTION

The launch of the **African Union (AU) Policy Framework on Farmer-Managed Seed Systems (FMSS)** and the formal recognition of the critical role that farmers' seed systems play in sustainable and diverse food production marks a **fundamental transition** towards more resilient, secure, and sovereign food systems in Africa. As outlined in the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) 2026–2035, the promotion and support of FMSS is essential to developing sustainable, collaborative, and diverse food systems that can withstand the challenges posed by climate change.

A recent, comprehensive African Union [scoping study](#) confirms that **farmer-managed seed systems provide 80% to 90% of all seeds planted** across the African continent. While formal commercial channels dominate specific cash crops like hybrid maize, soybeans and some vegetables, smallholder farmers—predominantly women—maintain the staple crops (such as sorghum, millet, beans, and cassava) that are essential to maintaining Africa's food security, diversity and resilience.

This is despite the fact that **farmer-managed seed systems have historically been left out of governmental support programs** and are not recognized by most national and regional seed policies and laws on the continent. In terms of funding, it is estimated that farmer-managed seed systems have received **less than 0.5% of the [investments in agricultural innovation](#)** for the Global South.

## BY INVESTING IN FARMER-MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS, AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS CAN SPUR PROGRESS ON NATIONAL POLICY GOALS AND IMPLEMENT MULTIPLE INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS:

### I. ENHANCED FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITIONAL DIVERSITY

Food security is impossible without consistent [seed security](#). Farmer-managed seed systems secure food production by making seeds physically and financially accessible to smallholder farmers. The wide diversity of crops and varieties grown by these farmers have a [positive impact](#) on dietary diversity and overall household nutrition.

[Contributes to e.g. Kampala CAADP Declaration, SDGs 2&3, ICESCR art. 11]

### II. CONSERVATION AND PROTECTION OF AGROBIODIVERSITY

FMSS are the primary mechanism for in-situ (on-farm) conservation of [agrobiodiversity](#). Farmers continuously select, grow, and save seeds based on specific agroecological conditions. This [selective pressure](#) allows local landraces to adapt to pests and shifting climate patterns, and counters **genetic erosion** by keeping diverse traits and associated traditional knowledge alive. [Contributes to e.g. CBD art. 6, ITPGRFA art. 5&6, GBF

Targets 4&10]

### III. CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE

The wide diversity of crops and varieties maintained by smallholder farmers, together with the heterogenic characteristics of many landraces, serve as a [protection measure](#) against climate shocks and stresses. [Community seed banks](#) provide a safety net in case of crop failures and allow farmers to replant their fields in case of adverse weather conditions. [Contributes to e.g. SDG 13; UNFCCC art. 4]

## IV. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Fonio, rocket, and quinoa are just a few examples of high-value crops once neglected by commercial markets, surviving only through FMSS and collections in the wild. Farmer seed enterprises can generate revenue streams by selling quality seed of locally adapted varieties, while many smallholders generate extra income by selling their surplus seed on the local market. Supporting FMSS can address current inequalities in the agri-food system and reduce inequality by 15% in 2033 in line with Africa's strategic transformation agenda. [Contributes to e.g. African Charter art. 21&22, AU Agenda 2063]

## V. SOCIAL COHESION AND PEACEBUILDING

Managing seeds collectively strengthens community relationships, builds mutual trust and creates hope for the future. Community seed banks, when governed with equity, accountability, and inclusivity, can act as grassroots infrastructures for peace and contribute directly to social cohesion and peacebuilding, particularly in fragile or post-conflict regions. [Contributes to e.g. AU Agenda 2063, UNDROP art. 24]

## VI. PROTECTION OF AFRICA'S SEED SOVEREIGNTY AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Farmer-managed seed systems maintain and protect Africa's patrimony. They act as the primary guardians of Africa's ancestral foods, genetic resources, and traditional knowledge. Their rootedness in local networks and production systems further provides important safeguards against shocks such as Covid19 and disruptions in global (food) markets. [Contributes to e.g. UNDROP art. 19, CBD art. 8, Kampala CAADP Declaration]

## SAFEGUARDS FOR FLOURISHING FARMER-MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS

Supporting FMSS entails allowing smallholder farmers to make their own choices on what crops to grow and how to manage their seed. It is NOT about 'formalizing the informal'. For example, some communities may opt to invest in farmer seed enterprises while others may prefer to remain disconnected from formal markets and regulations.

Farmers' Rights involve four basic principles:

- The protection of **traditional knowledge and indigenous practices** relevant to plant genetic resources.
- The right to **equitably share** in the monetary and non-monetary benefits arising from the utilization of plant genetic resources.
- The right to **participate** in national and local decision-making processes regarding crop diversity and agricultural policies.
- The right to **save, use, exchange, and sell** farm-saved seeds and propagating material.

## HOW TO SUPPORT FARMER-MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS

Governments can implement a plethora of measures to support farmer-managed seed systems. Some of the most important and effective measures identified by the Community of Practice on Farmer-Managed Seed Systems include:

- Recognizing **farmer-managed seed systems** in national policies and legislation as a legitimate and essential component of the seed sector.
- Establishing **public funding mechanisms** for FMSS.
- Supporting **community seed banks** and their integration with national gene banks to facilitate farmers' access to genetic material.
- Investing in **participatory plant breeding** and farmer-researcher networks.
- Implementing decentralized, **participatory assurance schemes** to maintain and improve seed quality.
- Strengthening local markets and creating legal space for farmers' **local seed production**, exchange and marketing, including simplified measures to register (heterogeneous) farmers' varieties.
- Designing sui generis plant variety protection models or adapting existing legislation to **cater for diversity**.
- Ensuring the **protection** of genetic resources and traditional knowledge where farmers' innovation is concerned, including the governance of data derived from FMSS.



Zambian farmers demonstrating their harvest during the 2024 Zambian Traditional Seed and Food Festival in Lusaka. Credits: Diana Mapulanga, CTD Zambia.

**“SOME OF THE CURRENT WEAKNESSES AND CONSTRAINTS OF FARMER-MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS ALSO POSE THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN FOOD SECURITY AND SOVEREIGNTY ON THE CONTINENT.”**

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