

# Empowering Small Farmer Seed Producer Groups: Income from Reaching Those Not Served by Seed Companies

**Problem:** Many small farmers in Africa have poor access to seed of new varieties. Commercial seed sales are limited for self-pollinating crops, and where demand is fragmented by local preferences. Seed companies focus on few varieties and often ignore those adapted to less favourable environments and those selected by women farmers. Seed systems research shows (1) farmer-to-farmer seed sharing is slow; (2) free seed creates dependency and undermines local seed systems; and (3) loan schemes that require farmers to return seed after harvest have high transaction costs.

- Innovation:**
- 1) Understand local seed systems;
  - 2) Train farmer groups to become seed producers and entrepreneurs, beyond contract production;
  - 3) Link groups to active research programmes for two-way interaction, preferably for several crops; and
  - 4) Forge complementary institutional arrangements according to the nature of the demand in each situation.



**Evolution:** Organisation of farmer research groups by NARO and CIAT started in Uganda in 1990, and several groups went on to sell seed of their selected bean varieties. MMM joined in developing groups as seed producers/entrepreneurs experimentally in 1995, with replication by other NGOs. Local seed companies are also contracting seed production through NGOs such as CEDO.



Successful groups have good leadership, develop their reputations and markets, and sell seed of several crops.



A new black-seeded bean adapted to semi-arid areas is an example of an important market served only by groups.



Manuals encourage the approach widely across crops; local organizations copublish in local languages.



**Impact:** In the Mbale pilot area of Uganda, 48% of all households now grow new bean varieties and, as an outcome, have increased household bean consumption by 50% and their annual bean sales by the equivalent of US\$58. Women report improvements in their livelihoods from higher yields that improve family nutrition and eliminate time-consuming foraging for wild foods in the dry season. In Masaka and Rakai Districts, 52 groups producing for local seed companies obtain a premium 25% above market price for food beans; group seed sales last season totaled 130 tonnes and will triple this season. Elsewhere in Uganda, at least 240 groups (9,000 farmers) are now producing for direct sale to other farmers. Results confirm the bean networks' strategy of multiple releases of varieties adapted to different situations -- African NARS have released 70 new bean varieties in the last 5 years alone -- and have influenced ASARECA and SADC seed policies harmonization. The approach has been adopted for a range of crops, in part through a Seed Systems Working Group of the Future Harvest Centers in Eastern and Southern Africa.



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