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Small enterprises ideal for producing quality seeds for farmers in poorer countries – UN



A Japan-funded FAO project in Uganda has supplied farmers with improved rice varieties

1 March 2011 – The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) said today that small seed enterprises are the best way of ensuring the availability and quality of non-hybrid seeds for food and animal feed crops in developing countries.

In a newly-published policy guide, FAO [cited](#) World Bank data that showed that up to 50 per cent of crop yield increases come from improved seeds, while farmers' access to quality seeds is a key factor for better food and nutrition in poor countries.

In recent years, however, many governments in the developing world reduced public investment in the seed sector, with the expectation being that the private sector would fill the gap, according to the guide, entitled “Promoting the Growth and Development of Smallholder Seed Enterprises for Food Security Crops.”

But in many countries, especially in Africa, the private sector did not fill the gap because medium and large seed companies tend to concentrate on producing hybrid seed for high value crops grown by large-scale farmers and market them in more fertile, wealthier areas – as a result, only about 30 per cent of smallholder farmers in developing countries use seed of improved crop varieties.

Hybrid seeds provide better yields and are disease resistant, but cannot be saved by farmers for the next planting because the hybrid plant seeds do not reliably produce true copies.

The majority of poor smallholder farmers growing food security crops such as sorghum, millet and cassava rely on self or open-pollinated seeds or crops that are propagated through dividing bulbs, or taking cuttings stored from previous harvests and grafting them.

FAO said they do not always have access to new varieties that can help them increase production using the same amount of inputs.

“It doesn’t cost a lot comparatively to set up a seed enterprise, especially when it involves local farmers’ organizations, but as case studies in the policy guide from three continents have shown, such enterprises can be highly effective in improving food output,” said the Director of FAO’s Plant Production and Protection Division, Shivaji Pandey.

The policy guide is based on case studies from Brazil, India and Côte d’Ivoire, the results of which have been published separately by FAO. In all three cases, a favourable policy environment was found to be a key requirement to the successful development of smallholder seed enterprises. Examples include an efficient quality control and certification system, private sector support, flexible legislation and the legal recognition of the rights of farmers to save, exchange and sell seeds of commercial varieties.

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