



# Resilience to shocks & stresses

*Emerging insights and perspectives for advancing the transformation of Africa's seed sector*

ISSD AFRICA BRIEFS:

**BRIEF 1: Terminology**

**BRIEF 2: Initiative**

**BRIEFS 3-7: Five ambitions**

**BRIEF 8: Enabling environment**

**BRIEF  
7**

## Ambition

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**Integrated Seed Sector Development in Africa (ISSD Africa) is an international Community of Practice (CoP) working to alleviate the problem of farmers' limited access to quality seed. Its vision is a vibrant, pluralistic, and market-oriented seed sector in Africa. The CoP unites diverse organizations that are inspired in their work by ISSD's guiding principles; they promote pluralism in the seed sector, recognize the value of formal, intermediary, and informal seed systems, take an evidence-driven approach, and pursue multiple desired food system and seed sector outcomes.**

This document supports and complements the third ISSD communiqué. It is one in a series of eight briefs.

**Brief 1 – Terminology**, defines the foundational concepts informing the communiqué and accompanying briefs.

**Brief 2 – Initiative**, introduces ISSD Africa, the ISSD Africa Conference, and their association with the African Seed and Biotechnology Programme of the African Union Commission.

**Briefs 3-7** capture the **five ambitions** for seed sector transformation in Africa. **Brief 8 – Enabling environment**, shares cross-cutting insights into stewarding transformation.

This brief presents insights generated from individual sessions of the ISSD Africa Conference, laying the foundation for developing perspectives and strategies for pursuing the ambition of resilience to shocks and stresses.

This document refers to and thereby acknowledges the ISSD Africa Conference sessions, ISSD Africa topics and/or other regional initiatives and hosting organization(s) that contributed to the development and formulation of individual insights.

### **ISSD Africa Conference: sessions, insights, ambitions, and perspectives**

Concluding the third phase of ISSD Africa, 170 seed professionals met in Kigali from 17 to 19 October 2022 for the ISSD Africa Conference, where they shared and discussed outcomes of the CoP's action research activities. This took place over the course of eight sessions, corresponding with ISSD Africa's eight topics, and was complemented by seven additional sessions on topics proposed by other continental and regional initiatives.

Each of the sessions provided specific insights. A committee comprising participants from diverse backgrounds, expertise, and areas of engagement in the seed sector, prepared a synthesis of emerging insights and perspectives. These have been grouped into five ambitions that provide direction and shape a vision for seed sector transformation in the coming years. These ambitions are food security and nutrition, equity and inclusion, competitiveness, climate change adaptation, and resilience to shocks and stresses. The third ISSD communiqué has been compiled to share these perspectives for advancing seed sector transformation in Africa.

### **Call for action**

ISSD Africa aimed to document the outcomes of the conference in the communiqué and briefs as accessible formats for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers active in and concerned with the transformation of Africa's seed sector. ISSD Africa strives to inspire these readers and encourage their use, exchange, and discussion of the perspectives and insights shared. It is ISSD Africa's hope that the communiqué and briefs support reflection on and guidance of organizations, programmes, and individual professionals in contributing to the transformation of the seed sector with the ultimate goal to improve farmers' access to and use of quality seed of improved varieties.

**ISSD Africa encourages your further reading of its communiqués, briefs, and other knowledge products, and participation in the Community of Practice.**

For more information, visit [www.ISSDafrica.org](http://www.ISSDafrica.org)

# Ambition

**The seed sector withstands, mitigates, and/or recovers quickly from disturbances over time to continue to perform its function and serve farmers. The seed sector also contributes to more resilient food systems.**

## **PERSPECTIVE 30:** **Learn from a humanitarian-development-peace nexus in the seed sector**

In fragile states, government, UN agencies, humanitarian and development organizations, and the private sector often engage in emergency response, and sometimes this occurs repetitively and even over many seasons or years. The recurrent, protracted, and complex nature of many crises reinforces the need for a more coherent approach to address immediate humanitarian gaps while at the same time ensuring longer-term sustainability. This requires investment that addresses the systemic root causes and impacts of conflict and vulnerability in the seed sector and supports peace that is essential for development. To achieve this, opportunities should be identified for collaboration, complementarity, and synergy in the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus in the seed sector, to better understand and intervene in seed systems and build their resilience to shocks and stresses in both the short and long term. Relief actions must be linked to more developmental actions soon after the outset of an emergency response.

**INSIGHT:**  
**Emergencies affect us all: we should programme our interventions in a shock-sensitive manner**

Emergencies, whether triggered by natural disasters or events of human origin, often disrupt the lives of farming families and their agricultural production. The seed sector is particularly vulnerable to shocks and stresses, with emergencies threatening and compromising overall resilience.

In such situations, it is imperative for responders to deliver the appropriate seed interventions quickly, intervening at the most effective and efficient point in the seed sector, with a clear understanding of the dynamics and impact of the shock or stress on the functioning of formal, intermediary, and informal seed systems.

**INSIGHT:**  
**Several tools can facilitate learning in a humanitarian, development, and peace nexus**

Seed system security assessments (SSSAs) have been replicated in several conflict and stress contexts for more than a decade, revealing solutions that solve stresses and stimulate longer-term investment opportunities. The work of Mercy Corps, SeedSystem, and ISSD

Africa in the landscape of seed aid, seed security, and in strengthening the seed sector in fragile states, has provided

important insights and tools, notably, the Seed Emergency Response Tool (SERT) and Context Analysis Tool (CAT). These tools provide guidance to a Community of Practice in the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus.

## **PERSPECTIVE 31:** **Understand the least and most effective seed system and seed security practices in conflict**

Continued access to and use of quality seed of a diversity of crops and varieties in conflict-affected areas is a prerequisite for farmers to thrive in the face of vulnerability. It is a key topic that many donors, humanitarian organizations, and other seed sector stakeholders want to be involved in. Seed sector development strategies and interventions commonly used in more stable environments may not work or be the best fit for conflict-affected areas. A better understanding of the least and most effective practices is sorely needed, to be able to reduce weaknesses and build upon strengths of seed systems in an efficient and targeted manner during periods of conflict.

**INSIGHT:**  
**Context-appropriate interventions require rapid context analysis**

Seed systems in fragile states function amid fluid situations and absorb the effects of market disruptions, displacement, and other features of conflict and stress, while trying to enable access to a diversity of crops

and varieties to support vulnerable populations. When effectively intervening in fragile states, donors, humanitarian organizations, and other stakeholders must approach agricultural and seed-related activities differently from how they would in more stable environments. To deliver effective support services in conflict settings, humanitarian and development organizations, donors, and other stakeholders need to understand that context is critical to the types of interventions they plan to implement for enhancing the resilience of the seed sector, the functioning and role of different seed systems within such a context, and improving seed security.

The Context Analysis Tool (CAT), developed through ISSD Africa, aims to help stakeholders understand how conflict dynamics affect seed systems and how to prioritize seed interventions to jointly and effectively improve the functioning and resilience of seed systems, while supporting peacebuilding efforts. CAT provides an analysis process and has the potential to help implementers working in conflict-affected areas of fragile states quickly grasp the environment and circumstances in which different seed systems function, and then identify practical entry points for selecting and designing seed security interventions.

Seed security interventions in these contexts should be designed and implemented in a manner that, at the very least, they do no harm and, where possible, contribute to peacebuilding efforts. Interventions may include seed distribution,

voucher systems, or cash handouts—or actions to bolster market supply. The use of these interventions requires assessing and understanding the context and potential impact of the intervention on the functioning of the seed sector before action is taken. They should also try to ensure that the needs of farming community members drive the strengthening, recovery, and functioning of seed systems.

### **PERSPECTIVE 32:** **Promote and use guiding principles for good emergency seed aid practice**

Currently, emergency seed aid predominantly uses direct seed distribution responses (although more market-based options, such as cash transfer, are slightly on the rise). Standard response does not adequately distinguish between different types of shocks and stresses (e.g., drought, war, conflict, Ebola, earthquakes) and is usually implemented without understanding the real seed security context and problems. An emergent set of ten guiding principles of good practice for emergency seed aid interventions is available. They guide the design, implementation, and monitoring of interventions, ensuring that they are context- and demand-based, and built on seed-specific knowledge (like choice of appropriate crop and varieties), without undermining existing systems and markets. These principles need to be further tested, refined, and promoted.

**INSIGHT:**  
**The ten principles guiding emergency seed aid need wider testing and elaboration**

Current principles and practices relating to seed aid are long outdated. Because of the challenging emergency contexts and the need for speed, it can be difficult for responders to adequately assess a local context and its needs, and determine the

most appropriate seed-related response. This can result in seed interventions that target a less impactful part of the seed sector or damage the long-term functioning of specific seed systems (formal, intermediary and/or informal), thus distorting different seed markets and stakeholder behaviours. The Seed Emergency Response Tool (SERT) lays out ten guiding principles to help shape practitioners' actions when effecting emergency seed security interventions. The principles and accompanying practices need to be widely elaborated, tested, and further promoted in their use and interpretation in varying contexts of shocks and stresses.

**INSIGHT:**  
**There is a growing body of knowledge on 'good or better practices'**

With seed aid interventions and practices distorting the functioning and dynamics of seed systems, seed markets, and stakeholder behaviours, there is a need for tools to overcome these pitfalls. It is in this context that through ISSD

Africa, SERT has been designed and tested. SERT presents

the background and concepts needed to understand how farmers in periods of stress might obtain the seed they want and need. The tool also synthesizes the growing body of 'good or better practices' linked to seed security planning, assessment, and response. SERT is for policymakers, programme managers, and field staff engaged in emergency and early recovery agricultural responses. It should help ensure that those new to this area of work, as well as those with experience, can make informed, quality decisions about the choice of seed security interventions and how best to implement them.

### **PERSPECTIVE 33:** **Leverage the private sector's contribution to seed sector resilience in fragile states**

Currently, the major role of the private seed sector in fragile states – especially in the conflict zones – has been to supply large amounts of seed to relief agencies; i.e., a one-off action. While seed companies may see large tenders as a business opportunity, free seed handouts often undermine healthy market forces. They depress business development opportunities and the client base of especially smaller local seed companies. New approaches are needed for sustaining private sector involvement in conflict contexts, building a continued presence, serving vulnerable farmers directly, and contributing to seed sector resilience. These novel operations need to support the development of a demand- and market-driven seed sector with minimal involvement of government and NGO subsidies for seed procurement and distribution.

**INSIGHT:**  
**Humanitarian organizations and the private sector must practice responsible and sustainable interventions**

The functioning of seed systems, including formal commercial channels, is impacted by shocks and stresses, while emergency responses impact the functioning of seed markets. The private sector does have an important responsibility in responding to seed security. Too often, seed security interventions, through institutional

markets, trigger unsustainable business arrangements with agencies and irresponsible reactions of companies (e.g., provision of substandard seed and the breaking of package integrity during distribution). Understanding seed sector and market dynamics is critical for humanitarian organizations in their procurement of seed from companies. At the same time, they need to assess the best ways to serve seed to farmers, ensuring seed security is addressed, but without negatively impacting market function. Humanitarian organizations also need to recognize the importance of engaging the private sector in seed security response interventions as market-based solutions, rather than as direct procurement and distribution, potentially bringing more positive, and less disruptive results.

### INSIGHT:

**The private seed sector has a greater role to play in building resilience to shocks and stresses**

This needs policy advocacy and action research to identify what options are available for the private sector to better prepare seed business for shocks and stresses and to sustain it thereafter. Several important action research topics for these contexts examine how the private

sector can address nutritional needs, climate-stress needs, and last-mile delivery in volatile conditions.

### PERSPECTIVE 34:

**Develop enabling policies for non-formal seed systems and diverse goals**

Seed policies generally promote the development of the formal commercial sector and also focus on major food crops. The development of a seed sector resilient to shocks and stresses requires recognition of the important role of informal seed systems in facilitating access to diverse seed for farmers, and in delivering when all else fails. Seed policies need to enable the functioning of informal seed systems and provide room for their improvement. This requires the review of seed-related policies through the lenses of promoting diversity, nutrition, and climate resilience.

### INSIGHT:

**Crop diversity is crucial for nutrition and climate change adaptation**

Crop diversity choices, preferences, and selections are driven by the diverse needs and specific conditions of farming households. These relate to food, nutrition, income, livestock, soil, local climate, and production environment. In

the context of coping with hardship, crop diversity choices may include considerations of strategic local food crops. Informal seed systems play a dominant role in addressing the multiple goals of farmers contributing to resilience building. Seed policy should broaden its scope by supporting the functioning of informal seed systems where the roles of women, local markets, traders, and seed social networks are key to crop diversity management and seed supply.

### INSIGHT:

**Community seed banks strengthen socio-ecological resilience**

Farmers and their communities struggle to maintain crop diversity, particularly of farmers' varieties. Diversity is disappearing or under pressure due to the commercialization of agriculture and the expansion of commercial food and

seed supply chains. Farmers' management of crop diversity is also impacted by recurring shocks and stresses. Community seed banks (CSBs) are forms of collective action to withstand and counter crop diversity loss. CSBs contribute to increased seed exchanges; improved access to novel crop diversity; greater saving of traditional varieties; and enhanced access, use and exchange of information and knowledge.

These effects strengthen the socio-ecological resilience of local communities. CSBs are constrained in their functioning by wider socio-economic trends, including social divisions, outward migration of youth, and a change in livelihood strategies. CSBs are an important community-based institution worthy of public policy and financial support.

### ISSD Africa conference session references:

The insights presented above emerged during specific sessions of the ISSD Africa Conference, organized by partners in the ISSD Africa CoP and global and regional initiatives. These sessions included:

- **ISSD Africa topic:** Agrobiodiversity, seed, and climate change (the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT)
- **ISSD Africa topic:** Effective seed insecurity response (Mercy Corps)
- **ISSD Africa topic:** Developing the seed sector in fragile states (Mercy Corps)
- **Initiative:** Are environments truly enabling private companies to invest in the seed sector? (Access to Seeds Index of the World Benchmarking Alliance and Resilience).

## Colophon

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