

*Learning Brief*

# **From Principles to Practice: Advancing the Ten Guiding Principles (10P) Framework into Tigray's Seed System Response**



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



**WAGENINGEN**  
UNIVERSITY & RESEARCH

Ethiopian  
SEED PARTNERSHIP



## About Mercy Corps

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## About Stichting Wageningen Research Ethiopia

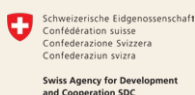
[Stichting Wageningen Research \(SWR\) Ethiopia](#) is an international non-governmental organization affiliated with Wageningen University & Research (WUR) and officially registered in Ethiopia since March 2021. The organization serves as a hub for WUR projects and partnerships in Ethiopia, working closely with the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, universities, research institutes, private sector actors, and development partners to support the transformation of Ethiopia's agricultural and food systems. SWR Ethiopia focuses on research, innovation, policy support, and capacity building in areas such as seed system transformation, food security, climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, nutrition, and inclusive market development. Its mission is to promote resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food systems that improve agricultural productivity, strengthen livelihoods, and enhance equitable access to healthy diets, particularly for smallholder farmers and women.

## About the Ethiopian Seed Partnership

The [Ethiopian Seed Partnership \(ESP\)](#) aims to increase food security, nutrition, and resilience for small-scale food producers by improving access to quality seeds of adapted varieties. The partnership targets one million producers, with a focus on reducing yield gaps for 500,000 and promoting sustainable agricultural practices across 12,500 hectares. Funded by the European Union and the Government of the Netherlands, ESP is one of Wageningen University and Research's (WUR's) flagship programs, with the objectives of ensuring the delivery of quality seed of adapted varieties to small-scale food producers across the country. The ESP program has four components that are implemented by three consortium members. Mercy Corps Ethiopia—in partnership with WUR—is responsible for implementing the component called 'Seed Insecurity Response in Fragile Contexts,' with the aim to ensure that seed response is effective and sustainable in targeted fragile areas.

## About ISSD Africa

[Integrated Seed Sector Development \(ISSD\) Africa](#) is an international community of practice guiding seed sector innovation and development across Africa, enabled by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Government of the Netherlands. ISSD Africa addresses seed system challenges in fragile and conflict-affected states by fostering coordination across the Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding (HDP) Nexus, bridging emergency seed interventions with long-term sector development to ensure responses are timely, targeted, and sustainable.



## Recommended Citation

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# Executive Summary

The conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region severely disrupted seed systems, destroying farmer seed stocks, weakening local markets and limiting access to quality seed. Emergency seed assistance helped prevent widespread production collapse, but repeated direct distributions—often late, externally sourced, and weakly coordinated—unintentionally undermined local seed producers, distorted markets, and reinforced reliance on humanitarian support.

In response, the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Natural Resources (BoANR), supported by the Ethiopia Seed Partnership (ESP) and partners, led a multi-stakeholder process to develop and endorse the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline, based on the Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid (10P), which provide practical guidance for strengthening seed security policy and programming. This process brought together government, humanitarian and development (HD) organizations, research institutions, and seed sector actors. Strong government leadership, inclusive consultations, and technical engagement enabled broad ownership across stakeholders.

Early evidence suggests promising shifts toward more market-oriented seed assistance. HD actors are increasingly sourcing seed from local cooperatives, strengthening quality assurance, and aligning interventions with local seed systems. Research institutions are reinforcing the use of locally adapted varieties, and BoANR is facilitating coordination among actors. Emerging mechanisms, such as revolving seed schemes and strengthened local procurement, are supporting more sustainable access to quality seed preferred by farmers while strengthening local seed production capacity.

With Tigray farmers expressing a willingness to access seed through market channels if quality, affordability, and timely availability improve, there is a strong opportunity to transition from repeated emergency distributions toward sustainable seed system recovery.

The Tigray experience demonstrates that coordinated policy leadership, donor alignment, and investment in local seed systems can significantly improve the effectiveness, sustainability, and resilience of emergency seed assistance in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

## Acronyms

10P	Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid	HD	Humanitarian and Development
ATI	Agricultural Transformation Institute	ISSD	Integrated Seed Sector Development
BoANR	Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Natural Resources	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
CRS	Catholic Relief Services	REST	Relief Society of Tigray
DSD	Direct Seed Distribution	SSSA	Seed System Security Assessment
EGS	Early Generation Seed	SPC	Seed Producer Cooperative
ESP	Ethiopia Seed Partnership	TARI	Tigray Agricultural Research Institute
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	TSE	Tigray Seed Enterprise

# Introduction

Before conflict erupted in 2020, seed systems in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia functioned largely through informal, farmer-led channels rooted in social networks,<sup>1</sup> indigenous knowledge, and local biodiversity. Most farmers relied on home-saved seed, community exchange, and local markets to access planting material. Seed access, storage, and use were managed at the household level, allowing farmers to maintain seed security through varietal diversity and multiple sourcing options. While these systems supported resilience under normal conditions, they remained vulnerable to shocks.

The conflict that began in late 2020 severely disrupted Tigray's seed system, which had already been hit by the impacts of the desert locust infestation<sup>2</sup> and the global COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Mobility restrictions, displacement, asset loss, and insecurity prevented many farmers from sowing or harvesting. The local markets and informal networks through which most farmers accessed seed largely stopped functioning or collapsed. Farmers rapidly lost the ability to produce, save, and share seed as they had traditionally done.

To prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, large-scale seed assistance became a central component of the emergency response, reaching hundreds of thousands of farming households each season. While this assistance was critical to prevent a total production collapse, it was largely supply-driven. Seed was commonly procured from outside the region and distributed for free. It often arrived after the planting window, did not match farmers' preferred varieties, and was sometimes of poor quality. In many cases, farmers adapted rationally to this uncertainty—consuming or selling the distributed seed and using the proceeds to buy varieties they preferred from the informal market.

Over successive seasons, repeated direct seed distribution (DSD) began to weaken local seed markets and displace local producers who had historically been the backbone of Tigray's seed system. Farmers increasingly expected free seed every season, reinforcing dependence on humanitarian seed assistance while local production and market systems continued to decline. This created a negative feedback cycle: as markets weakened, greater reliance on free seed further undermined local producers, which in turn made continued external assistance even more necessary.

As the crisis persisted and seed needs continued season after season, the limitations of conventional emergency seed responses became increasingly clear. Stakeholders recognized the need for approaches that could meet urgent humanitarian needs while also supporting recovery—approaches that were timely, locally grounded, and sensitive to market dynamics.

To address the continued crisis, regional leaders came together in 2025 with support from the Ethiopia Seed Partnership (ESP),<sup>4</sup> to ask a critical question:

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1 Alemu, A. R. (2020). [Cropping system, diversity management and indigenous knowledge of seed handling in the Western Zone of Tigray, Ethiopia](#). *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, 16(5), 318–329.

2 Nyssen, J., Negash, E., Van Schaeybroeck, B., Haegeman, K., & Annys, S. (2023). [Crop cultivation at wartime: plight and resilience of Tigray's agrarian society \(North Ethiopia\)](#). *Defence and Peace Economics*, 34(5), 618–645.

3 de Boef, W. S., Borman, G. D., Gupta, A., Subedi, A., Thijssen, M. H., Aga, A. A., Beko, M.H., Thein, S.Z.M., Thein, W., Okelola, F., Olusegun, O., Ojo, O.P., Agbara, C., Otim, G., Ssemwogerere, C., Ntare, B., Oyee, P. (2021). [Rapid assessments of the impact of COVID-19 on the availability of quality seed to farmers: Advocating immediate practical, remedial and preventative action](#). *Agricultural Systems*, 188(103037).

4 Ethiopian Seed Partnership website: <https://esp-seed.org>

**– How can seed aid better protect and rebuild local seed systems while meeting emergency needs?**

Through this process, stakeholders identified the [Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid \(10P\)](#) as a practical, evidence-based framework to guide more effective and context-appropriate interventions. The principles were reviewed and adapted for Tigray into the [Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline](#) (referred to in this brief as the Guideline) and formally endorsed through a multi-stakeholder process involving government, humanitarian agencies, development partners, and seed systems actors—eventually culminating in a formal sign-off by all stakeholders. For Tigray, the 10P provided a roadmap to restore order, ensure farmers access seed they want and need, and rebuild confidence in local markets.

This learning brief tells the story of how Tigray became the first region in Ethiopia to endorse the 10P. It highlights the journey of dialogue, debate, and collaboration that led to the local adaptation and formal endorsement, the champions who drove it forward, and the early signs of change already visible in seed aid practice. It also offers lessons and recommendations for Ethiopia nationally and for other conflict-affected regions and countries seeking to balance emergency response with sustainable seed system recovery.

*“The 10P gave us a common language to fix the broken seed aid system in Tigray.”*

*– Regional Seed System Coordinator, ESP*



*Photo credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps*

# Why the 10P Mattered in Tigray

## Tigray Seed Systems Pre-Conflict

Agriculture is the backbone of rural livelihoods in Tigray. Before the conflict, approximately 85% of smallholder farmers accessed seed through informal systems based on saving, sharing, and local exchange.<sup>5,6</sup> These provided diverse, locally adapted varieties suited to the region's variable rainfall, degraded soils, and short growing seasons.

Alongside informal systems, an intermediate seed system was taking shape, involving Seed Producer Cooperatives (SPCs) and seed unions supported by Integrated Seed Sector Development (ISSD) and Agricultural Transformation Institute (ATI) initiatives. Built on farmer producer group networks, SPCs and unions were supplying approximately 10% of the region's certified seed by 2019.<sup>7</sup> However, their growth was constrained by limited supplies of Early Generation Seed (EGS) and weak market linkages.

In 2020, the Tigray Bureau of Agriculture and Natural Resources (BoANR) established the Tigray Seed Enterprise (TSE)<sup>8</sup> to address EGS challenges and boost local multiplication of quality seed. However, operational challenges, the onset of conflict, and weak seed infrastructure restricted its effectiveness. As a result, the formal seed sector met only a small portion of regional demand, leaving farmers highly dependent on informal/local systems or external sources.

## Emergency Seed Assistance During Conflict

Following the outbreak of war, seed assistance became one of the largest agricultural humanitarian interventions in the region. Multiple HD organizations were involved in seed distribution, but without consistent coordination, tracking, or documentation, their efforts were frequently unaligned and sometimes worked at cross-purposes. To date, there is no single comprehensive estimate of the total financial value of humanitarian seed assistance provided to Tigray since 2020.

A wide range of staple crops—including cereals such as wheat, teff, and sorghum, and pulses such as beans and vegetables—was distributed through parallel interventions. These efforts often failed to consider local agroecological conditions, farmer varietal preferences, planting calendars, or quality standards, limiting their effectiveness and relevance.

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5 Argaye, S. (2019). [The role of formal, informal and intermediary seed system for food security in Ethiopia](#). *International Journal of Novel Research in Life Sciences*, 6(5), 57–65.

6 Amare, M., Hagos, A., Belay, T., Amare, H., Kassa, N., Abraha, A., Gebremichael, A., Teklewold, T., Teshome, A., Getnet, M., & Diro, M. (2024). [Current Status of Seed System and Actions for Its Revitalization and Transformation in Tigray](#). Stichting Wageningen Research Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. SWRE-RAISE-FS-24-032.

7 Hindeya, A., Kassa, N., Petros, S., & Haileselassie, Y. (2020). Strengthening Integrated Seed Sector Development in Tigray: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement.

8 Amare, M., Hagos, A., Belay, T., Amare, H., Kassa, N., Abraha, A., Gebremichael, A., Teklewold, T., Teshome, A., Getnet, M., & Diro, M. (2024). [Current Status of Seed System and Actions for Its Revitalization and Transformation in Tigray](#). Stichting Wageningen Research Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. SWRE-RAISE-FS-24-032.

Seed assistance is hardly new in Ethiopia; it has been implemented for more than 48 years,<sup>9, 10</sup> often across consecutive seasons. Yet the scale and intensity of interventions in conflict-affected Tigray exposed both strengths and limitations. Emergency seed assistance played a critical role in supporting immediate recovery while recurring operational and systemic challenges constrained longer-term resilience.

## What Worked

Farmers consistently described seed aid as a necessary response to conflict-induced losses rather than the preferred option. With on-farm seed stocks destroyed, social seed exchange networks disrupted, and local markets collapsed, distributions provided a critical lifeline. Households could resume planting and maintain some level of agricultural production and food security, despite the disruptive conflict conditions and the often suboptimal timing, quality, and quantity of seed they received.

## What Didn't Work

### > Limited Use of Seed-Specific Assessments

While Ethiopia conducted a national Seed System Security Assessment (SSSA) in 2016 that included Tigray, no comprehensive, region-wide assessment has been undertaken since the conflict began in 2020. According to Mr. Fisha Bezabih, Seed System Development Advisor to the BoANR, many humanitarian seed interventions relied on broader crop production data, food security indicators, or rapid assessments, rather than structured, seed-specific analyses. These approaches often did not fully capture farmers' seed access, availability, and varietal preferences.

As a program coordinator with ESP in Tigray explained: *"Simply, they distribute. Even sometimes farmers get seed from humanitarian organizations, but they don't plant it."* The absence of comprehensive and systematic seed system security assessments contributed to poorly tailored distributions and reduced the effectiveness of seed assistance.

### > Distribution of Poorly Adapted Varieties

Seed was frequently procured from outside Tigray, often bypassing local seed systems. As a result, farmers received varieties that didn't match their preferences or suit local agroecological conditions, sometimes leading to poor yields or crop failure. This reduced confidence in seed aid and led some farmers to reject it outright.

### > Late Seed Delivery

Seed distributions were frequently delayed due to restrictions in movements and long transport distances. In many cases, seed arrived after the planting window had passed, leaving farmers frustrated and limiting its usefulness for production and recovery.

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9 Sperling, L., et al. (2007). [Long-Term Seed Aid in Ethiopia: Past, present and future perspectives](#). Addis Ababa and Rome: Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, International Center for Tropical Agriculture, and Overseas Development Group.

10 FAO. (2020). [Evaluation of FAO's country programme in Ethiopia 2014-2019](#). Country Programme Evaluation Series, 10/2020. Rome.

## > **Dependency Dynamics and Willingness to Pay**

Over multiple seasons, expectations of humanitarian distributions influenced farmer decision-making. Facing limited cash, many farmers prioritized immediate household needs over seed purchases from local producers. As one NGO program coordinator noted, *"Dependency is developed over time, causing departments and farmers to totally refuse to [buy seed]."*

However, repeated free seed distributions contributed to dependency not because farmers were unwilling to engage with local markets, but because prolonged crisis conditions limited their ability to do so.

*"We did not choose free seed over buying our own seed; rather, there were no affordable markets, and no cash."*

*– Mr. Haftom, a farmer from Emba-Alaje woreda, Tigray*

Many farmers expressed willingness to pay for seed if it were available on time, affordable, and of good quality. However, financial constraints remained significant. As Mr. Haftom explained, *"After the conflict, cash is limited, no credit, thus I cannot pay."*

These findings suggest that apparent dependency may reflect constrained market participation more than reluctance to engage with local seed systems. Willingness to pay is closely linked to affordability, access to credit and functioning markets, underscoring how prolonged emergency conditions reshape incentives and choices for both farmers and seed suppliers.

## > **Local Seed Market Distortion**

Local seed producers, including SPCs and private seed companies, lost their customer base due to widespread free seed distribution, forcing many to reduce production, scale back activities, or cease operations entirely.

## > **Weak Seed Regulation and Market Oversight**

With seed entering Tigray from multiple sources and across regions, the Bureau of Agriculture struggled to maintain oversight and ensure quality. Farmers ended up with seed of compromised quality. While aid was abundant, it unintentionally weakened the local seed systems farmers depended on and eroded trust in seed aid itself.

*"The seed system in Tigray was totally disrupted. Humanitarian organizations were bypassing local seed producers, and farmers stopped buying seed because they expected aid."*

*– NGO Program Manager*

# The Journey to Endorsement

By 2025, regional leaders, HD actors, and seed system stakeholders recognized that the prolonged crises required a shift in how seed assistance was delivered. While emergency distributions had prevented agriculture collapse, there was growing agreement that future approaches needed to restore local systems rather than bypass them. The initiative was led by ESP and Mercy Corps, although many HD actors showed notable resistance to applying the principles.

The Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid (10P)—developed by SeedSystem and Mercy Corps in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and global partners—offered a structured framework to guide this transition.

The 10P emphasize:

- assessment before action,
- timeliness,
- farmer choice and varietal relevance,
- use of local markets and local seed actors, and
- alignment of emergency response with long-term resilience building.

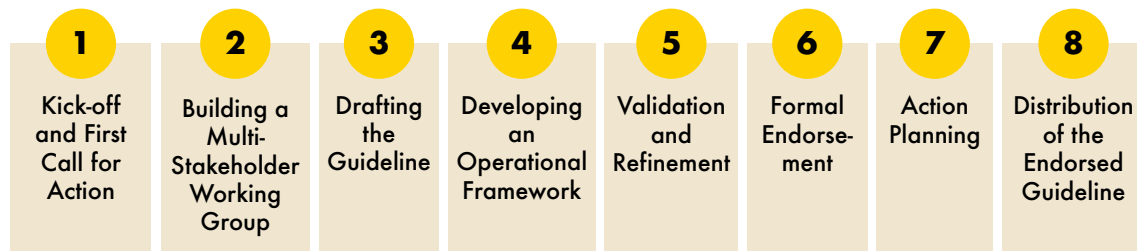
As one NGO representative summarized, the 10P were *“a very good starting point to improve the seed security structures of the region.”*

The endorsement of the 10P in Tigray was not a single event but a carefully sequenced process, shaped by dialogue, a consultative approach, strong leadership from BoANR, and technical support from ESP.



Photo credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

## The Endorsement Process



### 1 Kick-off and the First Call for Action

The process began in February 2025 during a kick-off meeting organized by Mercy Corps Tigray field office to launch ESP's Seed Insecurity Response program. The meeting brought together a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives from the BoANR, Tigray Agricultural Research Institute (TARI), the Tigray Cooperative, Marketing and Promotion Agency, the ATI, HD organizations, seed unions, SPCs, private seed enterprises, community seed banks, and regional, woreda, and kebele administrations. During the discussions, some participants—particularly representatives of government-affiliated organizations on the regional seed core team—raised concerns about the widespread free seed distribution by NGOs, noting that this “improper seed aid” had contributed to farmer dependency and weakened local seed markets. In contrast, most NGOs continued to view free seed aid as an appropriate response option. Participants urged the BoANR to lead efforts toward a more coordinated and regulated approach. This moment marked the first collective call for reform.

### 2 Building a Multi-Stakeholder Working Group

In response, the BoANR and ESP convened a multi-stakeholder expert working group to guide the change process. The team brought together representatives from key institutions across the sector including BoANR itself, regional agricultural research institutes, ATI, universities, HD actors, and seed-related development projects. This diverse composition ensured that both technical expertise and field-level experience informed the reform process.

### 3 Drafting the Guideline

The working group reviewed a range of existing documents, including the 10P and internal guidance materials, such as Ethiopia's temporary emergency seed guidelines and the Tigray Seed Matching Guidelines. Through consultations facilitated by ESP, the 10P were introduced as a foundation for improving the effectiveness and coordination of emergency seed assistance. The regional seed core team led by BoANR agreed to adopt the 10P as the basis for developing the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline and accompanying Terms of Reference.

The ten principles were adapted to reflect the context of Tigray, including its conflict realities, agroecological conditions, and institutional landscape. The resulting draft Guideline aimed to improve the quality, coordination, and effectiveness of emergency seed assistance while supporting the longer-term recovery and strengthening of the seed system.

## 4 Developing an Operational Framework

Stakeholders recognized that principles alone were insufficient without a clear implementation roadmap. A technical writing workshop was held in Maychew to develop this practical operational framework, bringing together experts from the regional seed technical committee, including the Seed System Division, Crop Directorate, Cooperative Agency, and regulatory bodies, as well as TARI, ATI, seed producers, and HD organizations.

Together, the group:

- Reviewed the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders in the implementation of the guideline,
- Identified barriers and mitigation measures,
- Discussed opportunities to integrate market-based approaches, and
- Defined monitoring and compliance arrangements.

Key outputs included a detailed operational framework for implementing the Guideline across regional, woreda, and kebele levels. The BoANR assumed responsibility for overseeing the implementation and ensuring the document was shared with government offices and partners at all levels. The Bureau also assigned the Crop Directorate and regulatory bodies to monitor compliance and enforce adherence.



Regional seed security joint planning meeting with private seed producers, seed unions, and seed enterprises.

*Photo credit: Nugus Kassa/Mercy Corps*

## 5 Validation and Refinement

The draft documents were reviewed and refined at a validation workshop led by BoANR and attended by members of the regional seed core team and some HD actors. Reactions were largely positive. Many stakeholders welcomed the Guideline, with some noting, "This should have come earlier." Their technical feedback strengthened the clarity, relevance, and applicability of the documents.

One key revision was renaming the document from the Tigray Emergency Seed Aid Distribution Guideline to the [Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline](#). Participants noted that

“seed aid” reflects immediate recovery through emergency seed assistance, while “seed system response” emphasizes longer-term strengthening of the seed system through market-based and development-oriented interventions.

## 6 Formal Endorsement

The process culminated in a high-level endorsement workshop facilitated by BoANR with technical and financial support from ESP. Representatives of the regional seed core team—including the Agricultural Research Institute, ATI, universities, and NGOs (REST, CRS, FAO, and Helvetas)—participated, endorsed, and signed the Guideline, confirming their collective commitment to its implementation.

With BoANR’s endorsement, the process gained legitimacy, institutional support, and momentum. Leadership shifted fully to the Bureau, ensuring the process was locally owned rather than externally driven.

*“When the Bureau of Agriculture championed the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline, everything else fell into place.”*

– ESP (Mercy Corps) Program Manager

The endorsement by all stakeholders was more than symbolic; it represented shared accountability and a concrete commitment to change how seed aid is managed in Tigray. By endorsing the Guideline, participants agreed to integrate the 10P into their operations, align donor and institutional practices with the framework, and strengthen coordination across agencies.



Key stakeholders, including BoANR, officially endorsed the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline.

Photo credit: Nugus Kassa/Mercy Corps

## 7 Action Planning

The workshop also served as an action-planning forum. Participants discussed challenges, identified intervention strategies, and proposed next steps.

### Identified Challenges:

- > Misaligned donor timelines and agriculture calendars, limiting the ability to deliver seed in a timely manner
- > Limited awareness and technical understanding of the 10P among seed system actors
- > Continued reliance on direct seed distribution, with market-based response still underutilized and misunderstood

### Recommended Actions and Intervention Strategies:

- > Strengthen Coordination and Governance
  - Reinforce existing coordination platforms, including the seed core team and technical committee
  - Institutionalize the Guideline within regional seed policies and planning frameworks
  - Establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms to prevent bypassing of the endorsed guideline
- > Enhance Awareness and Capacity
  - Conduct awareness-raising campaigns and training on the Guideline at national, regional, and woreda levels
  - Promote shared understanding of seed system assessments and market-based seed responses
- > Align Donor Funding and Timelines
  - Strengthen engagement with donors to align funding modalities and priorities with good seed aid principles
  - Advocate for funding mechanisms that support timely, market-based, and assessment-backed seed response
- > Build the Evidence Base
  - Pilot and document market-based interventions to build evidence

## 8 Distribution of the Endorsed Guideline

As part of the implementation process, the BoANR distributed copies of the endorsed Guideline to all humanitarian organizations operating in Tigray. During the dissemination, BoANR emphasized that all seed interventions must adhere to the endorsed Guideline. Humanitarian organizations that failed to comply could face disciplinary measures. This enforcement approach reinforced the importance and legitimacy of the Guideline among humanitarian actors operating in Tigray.



*Photo credit: Dara Royer/Mercy Corps*

## Debate, Skepticism, and Adjustments

The journey toward endorsement was not without debate. During workshops and consultations with stakeholders, several important areas of contention surfaced. Importantly, some humanitarian actors expressed concern that adopting the 10P could limit their ability to implement planned activities or disrupt ongoing programs based on DSD. Other concerns included fear that additional regulatory requirements could slow emergency response.

- Uncertainty about—and limited understanding of—what it would require to shift toward market-based approaches.
- Concerns about the implications for donor funding, existing program commitments and project pipelines.
- Worries that an increased emphasis on market-based approaches, quality standards, and strong government alignment could narrow implementation options and affect access to emergency funding.

These discussions reflected a broader tension common in protracted crises: how to balance rapid humanitarian delivery with longer-term system recovery. Some humanitarian actors initially perceived the 10P as introducing additional procedural requirements or signaling a move away from established ways of responding to crisis.

Through dialogue facilitated by ESP and Mercy Corps, stakeholders clarified that the 10P do not prohibit DSD. Instead, the principles emphasize that interventions should be based on seed system assessments and adapted to local conditions. Where markets are non-functional or farmers face acute seed shortages, DSD remains an appropriate option.

Consensus-building also required careful adjustment of some language within the Guideline. Participants emphasized that wording needed to reflect operational realities while maintaining the intent of reform. One of the most discussed revisions involved replacing the phrase “eliminate free seed aid” with “free distribution must be based on assessment.” Stakeholders noted that this change preserved flexibility for humanitarian operations while reinforcing evidence-based decision-making. Stakeholders also agreed to rename the Guideline from *Emergency Seed Response* to *Seed and Seed System Response*, reflecting its dual purpose of addressing immediate recovery needs and strengthening local seed systems over time.

The endorsement process ultimately became a space for negotiation, learning, and trust-building across institutions. Iterative consultations allowed technical rigor to be maintained while building confidence and shared ownership across all seed system actors.



Farmer planting 10 sorghum varieties and explaining their performance to participants during a farmer field day in Raya-Azebo woreda, which is part of the ESP+ seed security response.

Photo credit: Nugus Kassa/Mercy Corps

# Implementation and Early Impacts

Although endorsement of the Guideline is recent, consultations with key seed system stakeholders show emerging changes in how seed assistance is being delivered across Tigray. Government institutions, research organizations, and humanitarian agencies are beginning to put the principles into practice through adjustments in procurement, coordination, and support to local seed actors.

## Humanitarian and Development Actors

### Helvetas

Helvetas was actively engaged in the consultation, validation, adaptation, and endorsement process of the 10P, contributing field experience and ensuring the Guideline reflected operational realities as well as sustainability, quality assurance, and farmer perspectives.

Following endorsement of the Guideline, Helvetas has adjusted its seed assistance practices in several important ways. The agency is now working more closely with BoANR to strengthen coordination and accountability, and has deepened collaboration with TARI and Mekelle University to ensure farmers receive quality seed adapted to local conditions. Helvetas is also increasing engagement with community-based seed producer cooperatives and placing renewed emphasis on strengthening local production capacity, with the aim of reducing reliance on external supply channels.

For example, integration of the 10P framework has prompted a significant operational shift within the REPASS recovery project in Tigray, which supports 1,494 conflict-affected households across Samre, Seharti, and Abergele woredas. During the 2025 Meher season, Helvetas prioritized sourcing seed from local cooperatives rather than external suppliers. In total, 324.15 quintals (32.42 metric tons) of wheat and teff were supplied through five local seed producer cooperatives, enabling farmers to cultivate 570.25 hectares of land and contributing to renewed demand for locally produced seed. Helvetas has also introduced revolving seed mechanisms that promote shared responsibility and continued access to quality seed.

These efforts demonstrate an early transition from short-term distribution toward approaches that support local seed system recovery—with strengthening cooperatives and linking them to research centers proving essential for quality, resilience, and long-term self-reliance.

*“The Ten Guiding Principles have shifted our seed assistance thinking from short-term relief toward a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable seed system model.”*

*— Mr. Samuel Asmamaw, Project Manager, Helvetas Tigray*

### Catholic Relief Services

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Tigray provides another perspective on early shifts in seed assistance programming linked to the endorsement of the Guideline. Following the disruption of its planned multi-year Ethiopian Seed Activity due to funding suspensions, CRS adjusted its seed-

related work in the region. Rather than implementing large-scale emergency seed distributions, CRS is currently providing targeted technical assistance and limited financial support to seed producer unions around Axum. This approach focuses on maintaining local seed production capacity and preserving earlier gains achieved through partnership-based programming.

While funding constraints have prevented CRS-Tigray from applying the Guideline through large-scale seed assistance programming, it is recognized internally as a guiding framework for future interventions. CRS-Tigray reports that the Guideline development and endorsement process has reinforced the value of multi-stakeholder coordination, alignment with local seed systems, and avoidance of unintended market distortions.

These experiences highlight the role of the Guideline in shaping institutional readiness and shared standards, even where large-scale implementation is temporarily constrained.

## Government Leadership

Reflections from the Tigray BoANR also highlight early institutional shifts following endorsement of the Guideline:

- **Stronger coordination and accountability:** The BoANR is facilitating regular stakeholder forums, joint planning, and monitoring of seed interventions. This has improved alignment among government, humanitarian, and development actors and strengthened accountability in seed aid delivery.
- **Clearer structure and guidance for seed system actors:** The Bureau is advancing implementation of regional seed system guidelines and has developed a seed sector roadmap to clarify priorities, roles, and responsibilities across seed production, distribution, and regulation.
- **Steps toward system strengthening:** Early actions include supporting the establishment of a seed coordination body, strengthening community-based seed producers, and compiling lessons from partners to improve seed system guidance and practice.
- **Recognition of systemic constraints:** The Guideline development and endorsement process has helped identify key gaps, including weak coordination, unclear roles, supply–demand mismatches, and limited seed finance. Addressing these constraints is now part of ongoing efforts to improve seed system functioning.

## Tigray Agricultural Research Institute (TARI)

TARI plays a central role in supporting seed aid interventions through adaptive and applied research across its research centers in Alamata, Mekelle, Abergelle, Shire-Maitsebry, and Humera. Its work focuses on identifying and promoting high-yielding, stress-tolerant, and locally adapted crop varieties suitable for Tigray’s diverse agroecologies. TARI also produces and supplies EGS and provides technical backstopping to partners implementing seed assistance. This support is complemented by on-farm trials, demonstrations, and farmer training to ensure improved seed is used effectively.

Since the endorsement of the Guideline, TARI reports stronger alignment between research, seed supply, and seed aid programming. The Guideline has reinforced prioritization of locally adapted varieties and strengthened collaboration with partners to ensure that improved seed access is accompanied by appropriate technologies and agronomic guidance. This has improved the relevance and technical quality of seed assistance interventions.

## Agricultural Transformation Institute (ATI)

The Guideline development and endorsement prompted ATI to strengthen implementation of a seed revolving fund through an in-kind credit mechanism designed to enhance sustainability and accountability. At the beginning of the planting season, farmers receive quality seed on credit under a formal written agreement, witnessed by experts from woreda and kebele BoANR, as well as ATI technical staff. The agreement requires farmers to repay the equivalent quantity, quality, and type of seed after harvest.

Importantly, the farmer who receives seed at the planting time is aware of, and directly linked to, the farmer who will receive the returned seed, creating transparency and peer accountability. Seed repayment takes place in-kind during the harvest period, at the actual harvest sites, in the presence of the recipient farmer and experts from woreda and kebele BoANR and ATI, who jointly verify the process. The returned seed is immediately redistributed to other farmers during the same harvest season to ensure the funds continue to revolve. Overall management and oversight of the modality are handled by ATI to safeguard proper follow-up, credibility, and long-term sustainability of the system.

This model enhances transparency, promotes sustainable seed access, and offers a practical example of how the 10P can shift interventions from short-term distribution toward system-level resilience.

## Local Seed Production and Supply

Local seed unions, which had previously become inactive, are beginning to revive as demand for locally produced seed increases. This recovery is closely linked to changes in humanitarian procurement practices. Humanitarian organizations are increasingly sourcing seed from local suppliers, including seed unions, rather than relying primarily on external markets outside the region.

As a result, seed producer cooperatives that are members of seed unions and had halted production are gradually resuming their activities. This shift has contributed to increased sales of locally produced seed. For example, in 2025, humanitarian organizations and NGOs distributed 45% of the seed supplied in Tigray, of which 11,036 quintals were procured locally from suppliers within the region (personal communication from BoANR 2025). This reflects growing recognition of the role of local seed systems in supporting emergency response.

During a humanitarian and development actors' consultative meeting, Mr. Kalayu, Chairperson of Hadnet Raya Seed Union, explained that earlier free seed distributions had undermined local seed production. Many member cooperatives suspended production when farmers stopped purchasing seed, expecting free distributions from humanitarian organizations. He also noted that procurement from external sources further weakened local seed enterprises. However, encouraging progress has emerged in 2025, with some humanitarian organizations procuring seed directly from seed unions. This shift is helping to restore market confidence, stimulate production among cooperative members, and reactivate the role of seed unions within the local seed system.

*"If this Guideline is followed, we will finally sell our seed locally instead of watching aid bypass us."*

*– Mr. Kalayu, Seed Producer Cooperative leader*

# Key Lessons Learned

- > **Government leadership is critical and non-negotiable.** Strong ownership by the Bureau of Agriculture was central to advancing the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline and ensuring stakeholder buy-in in Tigray. Because seed regulation falls within its mandate, BoANR's leadership gave legitimacy to the reform process and encouraged stakeholder compliance.
- > **Prioritize sensitization before drafting.** Stakeholders needed time to understand, engage with, and believe in the 10P before co-creating the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline. Early awareness built trust and reduced resistance during the later validation stage.
- > **Flexibility fosters consensus.** Revising language, for example, clarifying that free seed distributions must be "guided by assessment" rather than "eliminated," helped bridge differing perspectives and strengthen agreement.
- > **Center farmer voices.** Direct feedback from farmers on unsuitable aid highlighted gaps and reinforced the need for context-appropriate approaches. Including their perspectives made the Guideline more relevant and effective.
- > **Endorsement is just the beginning.** Consistent implementation will require monitoring, capacity strengthening, awareness raising, alignment of donor modalities and motivations, and ongoing coordination. Sustainable efforts are necessary to institutionalize real changes in practice over the long term.



Participants in a farmers field day and experience sharing event, Tigray

Photo credit: Nugus Kassa/Mercy Corps

# Recommendations and Scale-Up

Building on early momentum, stakeholders identified the following priority actions:

## For Government:

- > Institutionalize and operationalize the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline by integrating it into regional and national seed policies, emergency response frameworks, and agricultural recovery plans.
- > Ensure continued strong leadership from the BoANR to coordinate actors, enforce seed quality standards, and establish clear roles and responsibilities.
- > Invest in institutional capacity, seed sector roadmaps, and preparedness plans to clarify roles, improve accountability and reduce duplication.
- > Strengthen local seed systems by supporting cooperatives, unions, and research institutions with technical assistance, infrastructure rehabilitation, and quality assurance systems.
- > Translate the Tigray Emergency Seed Response Guideline into local languages and disseminate them widely to ensure accessibility at woreda and kebele levels.
- > Strengthen monitoring and compliance by developing standardized monitoring formats and empowering regulatory bodies to track implementation and enforce adherence. Periodic experience-sharing workshops at regional, woreda, and kebele levels can help address any emerging issues for stakeholders working in seed interventions

## For Donors:

- > Reinforce the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline by requiring alignment in all funded seed assistance programs and partner agreements. Invest in operational tools, training, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure adherence to the principles.
- > Provide support for strengthening institutional capacity, financing local seed enterprises, and promoting sustainable seed access mechanisms such as revolving seed schemes, vouchers, and market-based approaches.
- > Prioritize procurement from local suppliers when quality standards are met, to help revive seed markets, reduce reliance on external supply, and foster resilience.

## For Humanitarian and Development Actors:

- > Align seed aid interventions with farmer needs and local conditions, basing decisions on seed system security assessments and consultations.
- > Prioritize local procurement to strengthen market linkages, ensure seed delivery matches planting calendars, and promote partnerships with local seed producers.
- > Broaden stakeholder understanding and adoption of the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline through outreach and learning sessions in other neighboring regions, starting with Afar and Somali
- > Document and disseminate lessons learned, and facilitate dialogue to deepen understanding and application of the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline.
- > Provide technical support to local seed multipliers and community-based seed banks to improve seed quality, diversity, timeliness, and affordability while reducing dependency on repeated free distributions.
- > Engage in national-level advocacy to urge policymakers to integrate the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline into Ethiopia's seed security strategies and align with national policies and long-term planning.

## Conclusion

The formal endorsement of the Tigray Seed and Seed System Response Guideline based on the 10P in Tigray marks a historic first for Ethiopia and the African continent. It shows that even in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, diverse stakeholders can unite to improve seed aid practice. The Tigray region now has a shared framework to ensure seed aid strengthens—rather than undermines—local systems. The critical challenge ahead is implementation: turning endorsement into consistent practice and scaling nationally, so that farmers across Ethiopia can sustainably access timely, locally adapted, quality seed.

*“For many years, farmers depended on poorly adapted aid seed. Now, with these guidelines, we have a path to build back local systems stronger.”*

*– BoANR Official*



Photo credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps