Grassroots seed multiplication in Ethiopia

By George Jacob

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Providing access for subsistence farmers to good quality seed stock presents enormous challenges to organisations involved in developing robust food and livelihood security systems amongst the rural poor in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. Self Help Development International (Self Help) working in Ethiopia have embarked over the past three years on an innovative capacity building programme in seed development and distribution, which has already succeeded in strengthening existing local seed supply.

Abebe and Tebewebch Kebret are seed multipliers in the Berta Development Centre district of Bora, Ethiopia.

More than a decade ago, the government in Ethiopia put into place a National Seed Industry policy to attempt to bring about improvements in seed distribution for agricultural production. Considerable advancements have been made in the development of high quality seeds, in streamlining of evaluation systems, and regulation of seed quality standards. However, agencies such as the state run Ethiopian Seed Enterprise (ESE) have been unable to meet the demand that exists for quality seed - of cereals, in particular. As a result, it is estimated that up to 80 per cent of rural farmers in the country rely on the 'non formal' sector for their supplies, with small-holders using their own seeds saved from previous crops, or obtaining stock from neighbours, often in exchange for grains or other commodities. Although the country's agricultural research system has developed and released nearly 400 varieties of 50 different crops in recent years, the ESE has only been able to produce 80 different seeds of just 20 different crop varieties.
Self Help Initiative

To overcome this supply problem, Self Help and its Ethiopian team have worked in partnership with the country's Co-Operative Development Bureau and Agricultural Research Institutes to develop, at grassroots level, a system whereby local farmers and farmer groups are supported with the development of a grassroots seed multiplication programme. This enables them to produce and market their own high yielding drought resistant varieties for sale and distribution to farmers across wide areas of Ethiopia's populous Oromia region.

The objective is to provide a sustainable supply of improved seeds to all programme areas. In order to achieve this, Self Help has supported the creation of seven primary seed co-operatives through three existing co-operative unions, which it has been involved in developing, to provide inputs and marketing support to farmers in the Sidama Elto, Walta and Melik regions of Oromia.

Across the seven co-operative groups, more than 350 individual farmers have become involved in seed production of improved quality varieties of wheat, teff, haricot bean and soy-bean, amongst the major crops that are traditionally produced by small scale farmers across the region.

To get the initiative underway, Self Help embarked upon a programme of familiarisation and technical training amongst its participating seed producers, and supported all of the farmer producers with seed production management, post harvest handling, and co-operative management and leadership training. The organisation purchased basic seed of selected crops from the ESE, and supplied this to its multiplier co-ops in order to rear and have ready in time for the new planting season.

It was critical from the outset that the timing was right and to ensure that good quality seed stock was available to the farmers when they needed it. Otherwise this would have destroyed farmer confidence in this enterprise and they would have found some alternative local source, and gone back to the low yielding varieties that they had traditionally used.

Cost share

Through the Self Help supported co-operative unions at Sidama Elto, Walta and Melik, the improved quality seed was provided along with other necessary inputs to several thousand farmers on a credit basis - with 25% of the cost being paid up-front upon delivery of the inputs, and the balance being paid after harvest in the first year of the project - 2005. During the second year of the initiative in 2006, the repayment schedule was organised on a 50:50 repayment schedule, and in the current year, the farmers who have been involved in the programme from the outset are paid the full-cost of the better quality seeds at the time of delivery.
Other infrastructure supports were also provided, with Self Help supporting each of the co-op unions with the construction of warehousing and seed cleaning equipment, to ensure that quality was maintained and spoilage of the stock kept to a minimum. The initiative has been one of partnership from the very outset, and the support and backing of the local communities, the unions, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Co-Operative Development Bureau, the ESE, and of the Agricultural Research Institutes have been vital to the success to date.

The challenges faced/Lessons learned

The venture has of course faced several challenges - a number of which still have to be overcome.

First, there is a perception amongst potential local buyers that the quality of stock that is being produced by their Self Help farmer multipliers is not of the same high grade as that available from the country's seed enterprises and research centres. Seed that is bought from the seed enterprises is clean and is well presented because it has been separated by mechanical threshers, has been properly cleaned with machinery, and comes in pre-packed bags. Self Help's multiplier farmers are still threshing with oxen however, and the sacks from which seed is sold can therefore also contain damaged seeds, as well as beards and husks, because it has not been cleaned in the same mechanical way. Local farmers sometimes judge the stock by its appearance, regard it as inferior to that supplied through the seed enterprises, and are therefore unwilling to pay the prices being sought by the farmer producers. As a result of this, the producers have been forced to accept a lower price - and will continue to have to do so until they have improved their marketing and presentation, and built confidence that their farmer produced seed will deliver the higher yields that they promise.

There have also been challenges with the marketing of surplus seed outside the immediate locality. Again it is a question of confidence in the product - which will be difficult to overcome until the quality of presentation of their seed stock has been improved.

Steps are currently being taken to strengthen links between the Self Help producers and the agricultural research station advisors, so that the issue of presentation can be tackled as a priority, and so that the mechanisms are in place to provide seed multipliers with the technical back-up that they will need to ensure the long term sustainability of their activities.

Latest recruits

Twenty-five farmers of the Fursa Farmers Co-Operative in the Huruta area are amongst the newest seed multipliers to become involved in the Self Help initiative, having agreed to take part after visiting the programme.
Sixteen members of the group set aside five hectares of land to multiply seed stock for the early maturing and high yielding CR Cert 7 variety of Ethiopia's teff grain - used to produce the country's traditional pancake-like injera bread. When they harvested for the first time last Autumn, they estimated that they had produced enough stock to meet the needs of up to 2,000 farmers in the locality, this year. Participating farmers were pleased not just at the wider impact that their activity is having - for they know that they also have a highly profitable and marketable commodity in its own right. In the past when farmers sold grain for consumption, they received approximately 220 Ethiopian birr (£18) per quintal in the local market, but with the seed stock that they now have they intend to charge 300 birr (£25).

This year the number of farmers involved in teff and wheat multiplication in Hurutu has increased to 50 farmers, with all of the farmers being organized into a local farmers seed multiplication co-operative, so that they have the necessary structures to ensure long term sustainability, and profitability of their enterprise.

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