Seed security in southern Sudan

Summary of published paper

Seeds-and-tools programmes have been widely implemented throughout southern Sudan as a means of increasing the population's food security. This has included transporting surplus grain and seeds from Western Equatoria - an area of plentiful rainfall, fertile soils and relative security - to food deficit and assumed seed-deficit areas in other southern provinces.

Three seed projects were set up in Western Equatoria with the primary objectives of reducing the costs of seed relief assistance, obviating problems of quality that had been experienced with imported commercial seed, and institutionalising production of quality seeds and seed self-sufficiency within southern Sudan. Based on fieldwork in Western Equatoria, Bahr-el-Ghazal and the Lakes province from 2000-2001, a recent paper describes issues relating to seed security in southern Sudan and examines the three local level seed production projects.

The main research question was to determine whether the relief seed distribution model, multiplying seed in western Equatoria for distribution in Bahr–el-Ghazal and Lakes, addressed the needs of farmers. The research comprised of a review of the agricultural research literature from southern Sudan, a formal household survey and a series of informal interviews and focus group discussions with farmers, local leaders and project staff.

The main findings of the study were as follows:

Impact of the relief schemes

The schemes undoubtedly injected cash into the local economies of the areas where they operated. However, after two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had been forced to withdraw support from two of the schemes, contract farmers were unable to sell their seed surpluses. The only market for seed was that provided by relief agencies, showing the resilience of local farmers seed systems even under chronic disaster conditions.

A major problem was the choice of crops and varieties and the assumption that because the seeds were being grown within southern Sudan, they were local and hence adapted. The seed schemes in western Equatoria multiplied Serena sorghum. This is a non-photo period sensitive variety that matures in three and a half months. The variety, which was developed as an early maturing commercial crop, could therefore be harvested before the main crops were ready. Yet despite repeated distribution of relief seed of this variety to farmers in southern Sudan, they have largely continued to plant seed of their own preferred local varieties.

A detailed review of agricultural research in southern Sudan found several references to the fact that imported varieties of traditional crops indigenous to the area were either inferior to, or no better than, local varieties. The fact that three seed multiplication schemes multiplied seed of a variety that was known to be inferior to local
germplasm from as far back as 1979, underscores the need for humanitarian agencies to draw upon all available information before embarking upon humanitarian interventions.

**Alternative interventions**

In such situations, the best source of seed of adapted varieties is the farmer seed system itself. Many seeds-and-tools projects now procure seed from within the very same communities where it is to be distributed. One approach that has been used is seed vouchers and seed fairs\(^2\).

A weakness of the farmer seed system in areas like southern Sudan is the absence of any effective mechanism to link the farmer seed system to sources of new germplasm that would normally come from research, trade networks and the formal seed sector. Interventions can provide an opportunity for relief agencies to inject small quantities of seed that would permit farmers to test and experiment with new crops and varieties. Where unknown seed has been introduced, farmers have shown their willingness to test and experiment with the new varieties. There have been notable successes, e.g. 'UN okra' and a type of groundnut known as 'Mr Lake' - named after the colonial officer who first introduced the variety. The fact that Serena sorghum was not taken up should have been noticed and acted upon.

A main conclusion of the paper was that the creation of artificial markets based on relief needs, as was the case with the seed multiplication schemes in Western Equatoria, is not sustainable in the long term. There is value in strengthening what already works and treating farmers as potential clients, rather than embarking on the more common and unsustainable supply-side interventions.

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\(^1\)Jones et al (2002). The need to look beyond the production and provision of relief seed: experiences from southern Sudan. Disasters, 2002, 26 (4), pp 302-315

\(^2\)Field Exchange, Issue 15. CRS seed vouchers and fairs-an innovative approach to help farm communities recover from disaster. p22

Taken from Field Exchange 19

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