GENDER AND FARMER MANAGED SEED SYSTEMS IN ZIMBABWE

Key stakeholders nationally and internationally must recognize the vital contribution of farmer managed seed systems to food security and nutrition, and to agricultural adaptation to climate change.

Women smallholders are the critical players in farmer managed seed systems. Their knowledge and expertise must be recognized, valued, and supported by policy-makers, researchers, and extension departments.

To ensure inclusive policy reform and implementation, women’s leadership within farmers’ organizations and civil society needs to be recognized, promoted, and supported. Concurrently, further work is required to address patriarchal norms in society at all levels.

Reform of support structures and knowledge systems is required to ensure availability of good quality, diverse, locally adapted resilient seeds. Farmer managed seed systems play a critical role here, but for these assets to be integrated successfully, an inversion of the current top-down structures and systems is required.

As part of its National Agriculture Policy Framework the government of Zimbabwe must develop a Farmers’ Rights Framework to domesticate the provisions of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. The framework must recognize and support FMSS as complementary to formal seed systems, and at the same time value and safeguard the critical role played by women smallholder farmers in these.

SUMMARY

Practical Action works with local partners and rural communities across marginal rainfed areas of Manicaland and Matabeleland in Zimbabwe. In these communities, women are the proven stewards and custodians of locally adapted seeds, and their selection, diversification, and innovation via farmer managed seed systems (FMSS). Food security crops such as small grains and traditional legumes, promoted via FMSS, are better suited to achieving food systems resilience and food and nutrition security in the face of climate change than commercially oriented cash crops, especially in areas of medium to low rainfall. FMSS ensure plant genetic conservation, biodiversity, and preservation while utilizing and valuing the expertise and knowledge of women smallholder farmers. Further coordination is required between government, farmers’ organizations, civil society, and researchers to promote and support gender sensitive FMSS which are critical to achieving thriving, sustainable, and inclusive agriculture-based rural economies.

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Farmers review cowpea varieties in Matobo, Zimbabwe. Photo: Practical Action
In recent decades the feminization of agriculture has become widespread in rural communities across the world (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006; FAO, 2017). As men migrate from rural areas in search of paid work, women are left with increased workloads on family farms and with increased responsibilities for household food security and nutrition. In Zimbabwe specifically, worsening economic outlooks have caused large numbers of men to leave the country for work opportunities in Botswana and South Africa. In addition, HIV/AIDS has compounded the number of female-headed households (and child-headed households) in rural areas.

Where men have remained in rural Zimbabwe, they tend to control the production and marketing of key cash crops, such as cotton, tobacco, wheat, and soya. These commercial crops have historically been the primary focus of government agricultural policy. Meanwhile women tend to be responsible for key food security crops, such as sorghum, finger millet, cowpea, groundnuts, and Bambara nuts. Climate change is disrupting rainfall patterns and increasing the frequency and severity of climate-related disasters, including flooding and droughts. Agricultural productivity is severely affected. In 2020 the World Food Programme provided food assistance to 3.7 million Zimbabweans (WFP, 2021). Practical Action's experience indicates that many of the food security crops that have become the preserve of women farmers are better suited to achieving food systems resilience in the face of climate change than commercially oriented cash crops, especially in agroecological zones 3, 4, and 5, where rainfall is scarce. The Government of Zimbabwe's National Agriculture Policy Framework 2019–30 (NAPF) acknowledges this and aims to promote more resilient seed and food production systems that are adapted to the country's five agroecological zones. This, coupled with a new pricing structure that equalizes the price of small grains with that of maize, is designed to incentivize the production of more diversified food crops.

**Farmer managed seed systems**

Many smallholder farmers across the world save seed from the previous harvest to plant in the following season. Farmers select from the best performing plants, then dry, clean, and store the seed safely. Often farmers exchange, sell, and/or gift their seed within social networks, thereby increasing crop diversity. Through these processes and over time, well-adapted crop varieties are propagated.

Research suggests at least 80 per cent of seed for food production in Zimbabwe originates in farmer managed seed systems (FMSS) (Zimsoff, 2018). FMSS make optimal use of farmer knowledge and experience, and support the availability of diverse landraces that demonstrate adaptability to changing agroecological conditions, and are more accessible to low-income smallholder farmers.

In Zimbabwe seed production, processing, and marketing is governed by the Seed Act and its Seed Certification Scheme Notice (2000), the seed regulations of 1971, and the Plant Breeders Act (chapter 18:16). However, the legislation is focused on eight crops which fall under compulsory certification: cotton, tobacco, wheat, maize, oats, soya, barley, and potato. Other crops do not fall under compulsory certification and can be multiplied, exchanged, and sold without stringent certification requirements.

Zimbabwe is a signatory to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) promulgated in 2004. The treaty recognizes farmers’ rights to save, use, exchange, and sell farmer-saved seed, and obliges government to ensure farmers participate in decision-making related to seed. However, Zimbabwe has not yet developed a Farmers’ Rights Framework to domesticate the provisions of ITPGRFA.

Several initiatives have been implemented by civil society to promote and support FMSS, but to date there has been limited coordination between these and little attempt to document and share evidence with a view to influence public policy. In addition, some initiatives by national private sector companies have promoted the production, processing, packaging, and marketing of farmer saved seeds; however, these remain in a nascent phase.

The recognition within the NAPF (2019–30) of the need for a more adaptive and diverse seed system, plus the economic incentives around small grains, means there is a window of opportunity to showcase the potential role of FMSS and the need for its recognition in policy.

Currently community seed banks are not recognized, protected or supported by any legal framework. As noted, however, the concept is gaining support among political and traditional leaders, civil society, and farmers’ organizations. Coordination is required to demand a legal framework that supports FMSS.
THE ROLE OF WOMEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS

The predominance of women in the production and processing of diverse, climate resilient food crops means that women smallholders in Zimbabwe possess a wealth of technical knowledge and expertise. Women are the proven stewards and custodians of local adapted seeds, and their selection, diversification, and innovation via FMSS.

The wealth of knowledge and expertise held by women farmers could be invaluable in informing government priorities around seed policy and research. This knowledge and expertise is particularly relevant to the work government is doing to explore the potential of agroecology: FMSS and women can play an important role in this.

Farmer organizations and civil society need to include and amplify women smallholder voices: inclusion of women at leadership level is critical. At a household level, women are allocated smaller plots than male counterparts, often on more marginal lands. Men tend to dominate in the marketing of crops, with women restricted to production for household consumption. Past experience shows that when market demand for crops that were securely within the domain of women increases, there is a risk that men will assert their power over the marketing of these and any improved incomes. Therefore, at the same time as supporting the recognition and support for FMSS in government policy and services, further work is needed to challenge patriarchal norms at household level. Practical Action’s work in rural communities in Zimbabwe demonstrates the effectiveness of the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology to do this.3

Our partnerships with the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers’ Forum and the Farmers’ Association of Community Self-Help Investment Groups showed that GALS empowers women to negotiate with men within their households on the support they need to enhance productivity and empowers women to be more proactive in this, rather than waiting for the men to create the space for them. It also enables women and men farmers to understand whole value chains and the important part that FMSS play in these larger systems. It supports the development of strong farmers’ organizations at community level via leadership development of women and men smallholders. An important learning is that GALS is able to constructively challenge patriarchal norms at the household level in a way that ameliorates resistance among men and mitigates potential backlash towards women.

CONCLUSION

Gender sensitive farmer managed seed systems play a vital role in supporting food and nutrition security, and agriculture-based rural livelihoods in Zimbabwe’s rainfed marginal lands. As climate change accelerates, locally adapted climate resilient landraces preserved and propagated by FMSS will become increasingly important. With policy recognition and coordinated support between government, farmers’ organizations, civil society, and researchers, gender sensitive FMSS could play a critical role in developing thriving, sustainable, and inclusive agriculture-based rural economies. These outcomes are essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), and 3 (good health and wellbeing). In addition, and underpinning all of these, is the pivotal role that rural women play in FMSS. Recognition and support for gender sensitive FMSS via effective policy and practice can therefore also contribute to SDG 5 (gender equality).

The promotion of and support to FMSS is complementary to strategies that are targeted towards areas of the country that experience higher rainfall and are more suitable to commercial and intensive agriculture. Hence support for FMSS can run in parallel with certified seed intended for commercial agriculture; the two are not mutually exclusive. While this policy brief has focused on the role and potential of FMSS in regions of Zimbabwe, FMSS may be a suitable strategy for sustainable and inclusive agricultural development in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.
Notes
1. Zimbabwe’s agricultural land is categorized into five agroecological zones. Region 1 receives the most reliable rainfall and temperatures conducive to cropping. Region 5 is the most arid and unsuitable for crop production.
2. This is consistent with global estimates of 80–90 per cent (Coomes et al., 2015).
3. GALS was originally developed by Oxfam Novib and Linda Mayoux. Further information is available in Reemer and Makanza (2014).

References


About Practical Action
We are an international development organization putting ingenious ideas to work so people in poverty can change their world. Our vision is for a world that works better for everyone.

We help people find solutions to some of the world’s toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

We believe in the power of small to change the big picture. And that together we can take practical action to build futures free from poverty.

Big change starts small.