

Access to seeds – why seed companies need to bridge the gap to reach smallholder farmers

The first 'Access to Seeds Index', which has recently been published, ranks private sector seed companies on their efforts to reach smallholder farmers. The report evaluates global and East African seed companies, and highlights their innovative practices for doing business with smallholder farmers. On her blog, Ann Tutwiler, director general, Bioversity International, discusses the Index's importance.

The first 'Access to Seeds Index', which was launched recently, evaluates and ranks the world's leading global field crop and vegetable seed companies in four regions on their policies and practices to improve access to quality seeds for smallholder farmers in developing countries. Worldwide, over 2.5 billion people manage 500 million small farms and in Africa alone, smallholders produce 70 per cent of the continent's food supply. To increase production, improve nutritional quality and adapt to climate change, these farmers need access to appropriate and high quality seeds.

At present, the private sector plays a minor role in reaching African smallholder farmers – only 2.5 per cent of seeds used by smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa come from seed companies. Yet the private sector is well-placed to boost smallholder productivity. Quality seeds of improved varieties have enabled farmers in

advanced agricultural systems to triple their yields. Farmers in Africa could see similar benefits from the knowledge, technologies and germplasm these private firms have to offer.

Access to Seeds Index Report 2016

The 2016 Access to Seeds Index shines a welcome spotlight on what the global and the African private sectors are already doing to offer farmers in developing countries improved access to quality seeds. The Index covers seven topics, each with indicators on commitment, performance, transparency and innovation. A separate Regional Index was compiled for Eastern Africa with slightly adapted measurements and indicators.

Apart from the rankings, the Index identifies a number of opportunities and good practices that seed companies could adopt to reach smallholder farmers.

In Eastern Africa, regional



Dr Ann Tutwiler, director general of Bioversity International.

Credit Bioversity International

companies outperform their global peers in many areas, such as breeding for local crops, reaching remote villages, and addressing the needs of women farmers. Around 50 per cent of smallholder farmers are women yet only three global companies explicitly focus on women farmers' input and training needs. Regional companies also show more focus on targeting diverse local crops and using smallholder feedback for considering local preferences which can influence R&D decisions. They also outperform the global companies on the conservation and use of genetic diversity.

For example, East-West Seed (see box), the leader of the Regional Index, performs strongly across all measurement areas, with programmes and initiatives supporting access to seeds for smallholder farmers and the commitments and policies to back them up. East-West Seed considers 90 per cent of its customer base to be small-

The Seeds Index

A billion people go to bed hungry every day, two billion suffer from malnutrition. And the global population is expected to grow by a further two billion in the coming decades, precisely in those regions – sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia and parts of Latin America – that are currently considered food insecure.

Agriculture in these regions is dominated by small-scale agriculture, with farms of around two soccer fields. Improving productivity of these smallholder farmers is vital to meet future food demands. With their strengths in breeding and delivery, seed companies can contribute to improving access to seeds for smallholders, enabling them to increase yields, improve nutritional quality and cope with climate change. However, currently only 2.5 per cent of the seed used by smallholders in sub-Saharan Africa now comes from seed companies.

The Access to Seeds Index evaluates how the seed industry is bridging the gap with the smallholder farmer. It focuses on seven global leaders in field crops (such as maize, rice and wheat), ten global leaders in vegetable seed and zooms in on 17 leading seed companies in Eastern Africa. It aims to provide an evidence base to the conversation on where and how seed companies can step up their efforts.

For more details see the Access to Seeds website: www.accesstoseeds.org