



Access to seeds or access to new profitable markets?

A response by Elizabeth Mpofo to the new Access to Seeds Index

“With over 200 million members, La Via Campesina is the world's largest organization of small and medium scale farmers. For years, we have been paying attention to farmer production, availability and distribution of seeds, with a specific focus on farmer seed systems. This is why we are also monitoring the Access to Seeds Index, recently reported on by the Guardian Business ([New index ranks Monsanto, Dupont and Syngenta on efforts to help smallholders](#)).

Seeds are imperative for the autonomy of farmers: they are a strategic part of our means of production. For centuries we have been exchanging seeds, even over long distances. Because of this, a substantial dynamic has emerged in which we grow, breed and select seeds ourselves, resulting in seeds that are well adjusted to local ecosystems.

The Access to Seeds Index however promotes a corporate-led seed system, thus threatening our control over our own seeds. This is especially problematic in countries where farmers still produce and exchange their own locally adapted seeds, and where informal markets play an important role in protecting biodiversity. In Africa it is estimated that over 70% of seeds used are not industrial.

In addition, the companies listed in this index generally put particular emphasis on export and processing crops. What farmers want to grow are diverse crops that are appropriate for their culture as well as the local climate and that increase biodiversity instead of reducing it. They want crops that provide healthy and diverse food for local people, that can be traded on local markets and that suit local food cultures. To the contrary, seed companies are more inclined to breed seeds with a high profitability than to develop seeds for healthy and diverse foods. Those seeds are oftentimes hybrids and protected by intellectual property rights that do not allow farmers to re-sow those seeds after the harvest. This is a violation of Farmers’ Rights as stated in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

Of course farmers can benefit from external knowledge. The Netherlands, initiator of the Access to Seeds Index, and other countries would do better to support agricultural models in which farmers share their knowledge with local communities, scientists and other actors. Many examples exist. One way is to support farmer networks that work with researchers to improve seeds and knowledge within an agroecological framework, while farmers retain control of their seed system.

In summary, the Access to Seeds Index is more focused on how identify new markets for seed companies than on providing tools to improve the lives of small-scale farmers. Farmer control of and access to their seeds must be central to any solutions. Only then can we continue making a crucial contribution to addressing some of the major issues of our time: food security, climate change, biodiversity and the preservation of vibrant rural societies.”

- **Elizabeth Mpofo**, 1 March 2016

General coordinator of La Via Campesina, an international farmers' organization with 200 million members