

Small-scale Farmers Venture into Commercial Seed Production

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There is virtually no seed of improved semi-arid crops (like pearl millet, sorghum, cowpeas, and groundnuts) sold on the market in southern Africa, in spite of the importance of these crops to the livelihoods of people in semi-arid tropics in the region. To address this shortcoming, ICRISAT is collaborating with Commutech, a non-governmental organization, and two private seed companies, the Seed Company of Zimbabwe (Seed Co.) and PANNAR, in a pilot project on on-farm commercial seed production by small-scale farmers in Zimbabwe. The project was initiated during the 1999/2000 season in Wards 9 and 13, Tsholotsho district, Matabeleland North, and Ward 21, Chivi district. Over 600 farmers operating in groups of 20 to 30 are participating with each allocating 1 to 3 ha for the production of seed of pearl millet variety PMV 3 and sorghum variety Macia.

Collaborating partners in the project have different responsibilities. Commutech is responsible for community mobilization, organization, and local supervision and monitoring of implementation through its technicians based in the project Wards. The seed companies are responsible for contractual arrangements with farmers, registration of the venture with appropriate authorities, compliance of the project with rules and regulations of the national seed service in Zimbabwe, and the sampling and testing of seed produced by farmers prior to purchasing it. And ICRISAT is responsible for training farmers on appropriate management procedures for on-farm seed production, and catalysing linkages between other stakeholders (the Departments of Research and Extension Services) and the project.

Most of the farmers failed to meet the isolation distance required to avoid contamination of the seed crop and were dropped from the scheme. Only 22-23% of farmers in both Tsholotsho and Chivi were successful in producing and delivering seed of acceptable quality (Table 1). Of the 124 ha put under the multiplication of PMV 3 seed in Tsholotsho by 336 farmers, only 74.2 ha was declared harvestable as seed. Slightly over 27 tons of seed was delivered to the seed companies, though the expected harvest was 44.6 tons. In Chivi, 330 farmers took part in the project. They multiplied seed of Macia on 133 ha. Only 75 farmers were successful in producing a seed crop of good quality and purity, delivering 22.4 tons of seed.

Constraints: Semi-arid areas in southern Africa are under threat of food insecurity. The top priority for most farmers in these areas is food for their families before selling. As a result, those farmers who harvested a good quality seed crop had to first ensure that their families retain enough for food before selling. This greatly reduced the amount of seed that was eventually delivered for sale.

Contribution towards Achieving Project Goals

The project has provided collaborators and farmers involved with an opportunity to learn about the likely problems of on-farm seed multiplication. As a result of experiences from the last season, farmers in Kulumusenza, Vaghazini, and Dlamini areas of Tsholotsho and the successful Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) in Chivi have grouped themselves into seed production clubs and approached their village headman to be allocated special land for seed that is properly isolated. A new pilot project for Tsholotsho for the coming season targets only 138 farmers, all of whom have registered as members of small-scale seed production associations in their respective villages. It is hoped that this will help address the quality problems encountered during the 1999/2000 season.

Table 1. Summary of small-scale seed production in 1999/2000.

Seed of the sorghum variety Macia produced in Chivi, Zimbabwe, 1999/2000.

Farmers involved	Successful farmers	Farmers who delivered seed	Seed produced (t)
330	112	75	22.4

Seed of the pearl millet variety PMV 3 produced in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe, 1999/2000.

Farmers involved	Successful farmers	Farmers who delivered seed	Seed produced (t)
336	127	76	27.5