

Protecting small farmers in Pakistan in the wake of the new Seed Act

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As a result of the Seed (Amendment) Act, farmer friendly seed policies have been replaced by legislation which favours multinational corporations. **Abdul Waheed Jamali** discusses why this is a problem, and draws on Sindh as a case study to explore how state governments can support existing public bodies to support small farmers.



Despite much opposition by civil society organisations (CSOs), small farmers and progressive growers, the Senate of Pakistan approved [Seed \(Amendment\) Act](#) in early 2016. According to the amendment, no unregistered person, whether it is farmers or institutions, will be allowed to stock, sell or exchange any seeds without official permission. It will be a punishable crime with prescribed fines and imprisonment.

Everyone was hopeful that the Pakistan People Party's majority in the Senate would help to block the amendments to the Seed Act, which was originally passed by the Government of Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. The Seed Act 1976 was considered farmer friendly, and the legislation was such that there was little concern about gene tampering in Pakistan. It made citizens sovereign over their seed, and the public sector alone was responsible for seed development and registration.

The amendments in Seed Act have disappointed CSOs at home and abroad. The charges are not in the public interest, and instead favour multinational seed corporations, which now have the power to manipulate and compromise our indigenous seeds and patent them as their own. This is with the support of the federal government, despite the fact that the [18th Amendment](#) made agriculture a provincial subject.

Mr Nasir Aziz, Policy Advocacy Officer of Action Aid Pakistan, is of the view that “this Act allows multinational corporations to produce basic seed for its multiplication and certification, and also set up accredited seed testing laboratories”. [The position paper on the Seed \(Amendment\) Act 2016 developed by SEARCH Pakistan](#) with the support of Action Aid Pakistan states that it allows transnational corporations (TNCs) to register genetically modified (GM) varieties with some conditions, but has no damage clause included should the GM varieties be found to damage human health or the environment.

The position paper further states that,

“the Seed Act 2016 is an example of obedience of our governments to rich transnational corporations. An amendment Act is in compliance with TRIPs, which guarantees the private sector taking control over the livelihood of small farmers and is one of the most anti-farmer Acts in Pakistan. This terrible step have worsen food insecurity in Pakistan mainly in Sindh province.”

According to a young researcher on food security and water Mr Zulfiqar Halepoto,

“Pakistan is rich in fertile land but this jewel is being wasted. There are many reasons for that; but the majority are identified as; the man behind the plough is always ignored and the government has facilitated the handing over of our seed and productive resources to the foreign corporate world. Our planners and politicians only see natural resources, including seeds, as capital for businessmen and investors, not as basic needs and livelihoods of citizens or their indispensability to the economy.”

The Sindh Seed Corporation its potential to protect small farmers

The Sindh Seed Corporation was established in 1981 through Seed Act 1976 to procure, process and distribute certified seed. Due to the amendments; Sindh Seed Corporation has lost its importance. If one visits the country area, you will find that multinational companies and TNCs are aggressively promoting their seed varieties, encroaching on the role of SSC.

It might be that the PPP couldn't mobilise the federal government to support a pro farmer amendment in Seed Act 2016 because they were not in power. But what stops the PPP Government in Sindh to improve the Sindh Seed Corporation (SSC) enabling the institution to support small farmers and provide quality seed?

One reason might be that many of the farmers are unaware of the existence of SSC. Recently, I visited northern districts of Sindh, where I found small farmers and peasants were much concerned about seed-related issues, food insecurity and the growing illegal and uncertified seed business in the province. After interviewing farmers from dozens of villages I discovered that most farmers think Sindh doesn't had an institution or department to deal with seed.



Image: Farmers in Sindh, Pakistan, queue for seeds and fertiliser following the 2010 floods. Credit: Vicki Francis/ [Department for International Development](#) CC BY 2.0

There is also the challenge that as things stand the SSC seems incompetent, for example when it comes to developing climate smart seed varieties. The Corporation has almost lost its control over the land, which was allotted for seed development on lease. [SSC claims](#) they have eight basic seed farms covering total 6229 acres of land, but on ground it is clear this is not the case because feudal and political lords have grabbed the land. What is more, in the wake of the 2010 floods almost all the seed processing plants are not functioning due to lack of maintenance. The farmers I spoke to also denied the claims of SSC that the corporation has always provided the required seed varieties to the farmers and growers on time.

These issues clearly need to be addressed but the SSC can have a positive role in the face of the new legislation. As Chief Executive of Karachi-based NGO [HANDS](#) Dr Shaikh Tanveer Ahmed puts it,

“the Sindh Seed Corporation must be revived and improved as it can provide quality seed to small farmers and growers on subsidised rates with crop insurance. It is the only corporation which can protect small farmers from the violations of TNCs and others”.

In this context it is clear the Sindh Government needs to develop a sustainable agriculture policy covering seed, research, and food security issues for supporting vulnerable segments of society like small farmers, landless peasants and poor people, particularly women.

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