

# Seed-Related Assistance in Fragile Contexts: Lessons for COVID-19 Response | Questions & Answers

## Background

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, [SCALE](#) partnered with technical experts for a discussion on *Seed-Related Assistance in Fragile Contexts: Lessons for COVID-19 Response* ([recording available here](#)). As a resource for those in the seed sector community to use, the SCALE team has put together the below document with questions from the webinar, which the panelists have answered. Relevant resources are also included in the table below.

I. General Questions		
Question	Response	Related Resources
What are the likely primary impacts (direct effects) of COVID-19 on the seed sector?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Restrictions on movements have rendered markets non-functional and will limit seed availability and access.</li> <li>Hiked prices due to low seed supply means resource-poor farmers will have economic difficulty accessing seed</li> <li>If farmers cannot access seed, they may alter crop priorities or reduce land size for certain crops</li> <li>Where established supply chains are disrupted, agro-dealers will not access seeds to sell.</li> <li>Seed exchange models that require close proximity, such as seed fairs, can no longer be implemented</li> </ul>	
What are the likely secondary impacts of COVID-19 on the seed sector?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Longer storage periods caused by lockdowns may reduce seed viability</li> <li>Inability of technical staff to travel and monitor seed production process may compromise seed quality</li> <li>Firms are also constrained by limited supply of other inputs including labor which may affect seed quality &amp; quantity.</li> </ul>	
What key measures can be taken to support the seed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailor response to specific crop needs.</li> <li>Encourage farmers to save seed</li> </ul>	

<p><b>sector in light of these likely impacts?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any potential seed-related response must be informed by needs assessment. Refer to the needs assessment guide at <a href="http://seedssystem.org">seedssystem.org</a></li> <li>• Lack of seed or accessibility-related constraints must be verified through seed systems security assessment. (see <a href="http://seedssystem.org">seedssystem.org</a> for guidance)</li> <li>• Direct seed distribution can be implemented in line with the specifications in relation to COVID-19 context</li> <li>• Cash based measures such as cash transfer for seed can be implemented, but should be complemented with market assessments</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Why is there an assumption that the impact of COVID-19 on seeds will last a long time? Evidence from Ebola, is that recovery happened the following season, with no medium- or long-term impacts on agricultural production.</b></p>	<p>COVID-19 has and will probably have more of an extensive impact on the agriculture and seed sectors in particular. While the impact of Ebola cannot be downplayed, the Ebola outbreak did not warrant the massive-near-global lockdowns experienced with COVID-19. Seed systems are particularly affected because a lot of smallholder farmers depend on free movements of seed (especially for grains) through commodity corridors - which may traverse regions within a country or across countries. The impact of bans on domestic and international flights and restrictions on movements (for people and goods including seeds) cannot be overemphasized</p>	<p><a href="#">Guidance for emergency seed interventions during COVID-19</a></p>
<p><b>I see seed emergencies as a short-term solution but building resilience post-COVID-19 seems to be a more critical approach. Any comments?</b></p>	<p>L Sperling totally agrees. Building resilient seed systems is the pivotal vision for the near future (not far future, but near future). Building resilience of smallholder farmers should be an element of all interventions. The work that has been done on seed systems to date has encouraged true analysis rather than assumption, hopefully leading to a reduction of negative seed market impacts. Understanding how and where farmers source seed also allows for fine-tuned tweaking, hopefully resulting in greater farmer choice and ability to make “game day” crop and variety decisions when purchasing for a planting season.</p>	
<p><b>Ideally responses to seed and food securities issues should go in holistically, what does the panel think?</b></p>	<p>There is a good deal of recent attention on the formal seed sector already, linked to food supply chains. (e.g. <a href="http://www.fao.org/africa/news/detail-news/en/c/1272643/">http://www.fao.org/africa/news/detail-news/en/c/1272643/</a>). It is the informal seed sector and more smallholder farmers that are being given less strategic and practical attention.</p>	<p><a href="#">Tackling COVID-19’s effect on food supply chains in Africa</a></p>

<p><b>A COVID-19 and Seed Security Thinking Group to think in the longer term is an excellent initiative. How soon could this group come up with policy advice for governments and donors?</b></p>	<p>The TG is planning to have a first set of recommendations in 2-2 ½ weeks (on the stop gap work) and a second set of recommendations within one month.</p>	
<p><b>Does COVID-19 present an opportunity for community-based seed production?</b></p>	<p>Yes, it does. Strengthening community-based seed production will create a sustainable seed supply even where restrictions on movements have impeded the seed flows, especially in market-dependent seed systems. This impact is and will continue to be worse in areas that depend on seed imports either from other countries or regions</p>	
<p><b>How can we best improve coordination of activities in the seed sector among the seed sector stakeholders amidst the COVID-19 situation?</b></p>	<p>Establish reliable information and communication network on agriculture and local markets. In the event of implementing any seed related interventions, coordination with other seed sector stakeholders is essential to avoid potential market distortions and duplication of effort.</p>	
<p><b>In this COVID 19 situation, what do you think about the Quality Declared Seeds (QDS) to alleviate the problem of Certification?</b></p>	<p>QDS still has to undergo seed certification, although with less stringent requirement as opposed to higher classes of certified seeds. QDS presents an opportunity to increase availability of relatively high-quality seed, guided by local technical knowledge and premised on social certification. In some countries, QDS is considered another class of certified seed, officially recognized - but distinct in the sense that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The level of inspection by seed certification authorities is lower (sometimes 10-20%)</li> <li>• All production processes are vested in the local individual QDS producers or QDS producer groups</li> <li>• Commercialization and utilization of QDS is limited to the region of production</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">QDS production in Tanzania</a></p>

<p><b>What options are available for VPCs, which are difficult to preserve especially with respect to some inter-state travel restrictions associated with COVID-19?</b></p>	<p>VPCs generally need short supply chains and great attention to transport and to maintaining viability of planting material. If activities are possible with these crops, and warranted, supply is likely to be local.</p>	
<p><b>What will be the impact of Seed Aid on the private seed sector after the COVID-19 crisis?</b></p>	<p>There are three particular impacts of note. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flooding of markets with free seed and distortion of local seed supply channels</li> <li>• Increased seed aid is likely to destabilize seed prices – and reduce private seed sector competitiveness</li> <li>• Seed quality is likely to be compromised - with a surge in demand for seed by implementing agencies, treated grain may find its way into the seed supply chain</li> </ul>	

## II. Questions Relating to Farmer-Saved Seeds

Question	Response	Related Resources
<p><b>If we encourage the “Save Seed Campaign,” how will it impact formal seed systems?</b></p>	<p>Generally, farmers save seed for most crops that they produce every season - except for crops such as maize and exotic vegetables that require planting of certified seeds every season to maintain productivity, genetic purity and vigor. For crops such as beans, up to 97% of seeds come from informal sources, 40% of these are own saved. The public sector remains critical in varietal development for these crops, and the major source of early generation seed. For many rural smallholder farmers, the “save seed campaign” is merely a reinforcement of a normal practice.</p>	<p><a href="#">Bean study in Western Kenya</a></p>
<p><b>During COVID-19, as family members are locked at home there is a chance that “saved seeds” could be used as food. If the lockdown</b></p>	<p>Before deciding on whether seed relief can be implemented, it is useful to conduct a needs assessment to verify that farmers have no saved seeds. It is also a critical juncture to determine what the correct response is here. Is a short-term food assistance activity or unconditional cash modality preferred to relieve immediate</p>	<p><a href="#">FAO guidance on needs assessment</a></p>

<p><b>continues, we may need relief. Do you have any comments about this?</b></p>	<p>household food security pressure? There should be careful assessment and elaboration of which interventions bring greater risks and benefits at this time.</p>	
<p><b>How can we make sure that the farmers will not consume the saved seeds?</b></p>	<p>The first step is the “save seed campaign” as a preparedness measure. Sometimes, and based on the findings from the needs assessment, food relief can also be implemented as a “seed protection measure” to prevent the farmers from consuming saved seed.</p>	<p><a href="#"><u>Seed saving as a preparedness measure</u></a>  <a href="#"><u>Food relief as seed protection measure</u></a></p>
<p><b>Will farmers be more inclined to store grains?</b></p>	<p>Farmers often save seeds (usually grain that is separated and specially processed) for most crops that they produce every season - except for crops such as maize and exotic vegetables that require planting of certified seeds every season. For crops such as beans, up to 97% of seeds come from informal sources. 40% of these are their own saved “seed” in the form of grain. For many rural smallholder farmers, the “save seed campaign” is merely a reinforcement of a normal practice</p>	<p><a href="#"><u>Analysis of quality control in the informal seed sector</u></a></p>
<p><b>Keeping COVID-19 in mind, what is the good seed strategy in the long-term? Should we improve seed saving and empower farmers and local seed companies, so that the local farmers, regions and countries are more seed sufficient and resilient?</b></p>	<p>The following are a few strategies that can be implemented:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The first step towards seed systems resilience is to enhance farmers’ ability to save seeds - this is a preparedness measure.</li> <li>● Adopting decentralized seed production models can also help increase the quality of seeds available for farmers within close proximity and affordably (see examples in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Malawi).</li> <li>● Strengthen farmer seed enterprises for enhanced sustainability and resilience</li> <li>● Strengthen functional linkages between local private seed companies and public sector (see example in Pakistan)</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#"><u>Decentralized seed production in Tanzania</u></a>  <a href="#"><u>Decentralized seed production in Malawi</u></a>  <a href="#"><u>Fostering public private partnerships in seed production in Pakistan</u></a></p>
<p><b>With storage of seed being the best option for making seed available during this crisis, do you think governments will be willing to relax their guidelines/regulations on</b></p>	<p>Farmers do and will continue to save seeds regardless of the stringent seed regulations - for instance, in Kenya the common bean is categorized under scheduled crops, requiring mandatory seed certification and seed supply only via the legally sanctioned channels. However, 97% of bean seeds come from informal sources of which 40% is own saved.  A proactive approach by seed policy makers would be to strengthen the capacity of farmers thorough training on quality control to complement farmers’ traditional</p>	

<p><b>seed laws and related policies e.g. Plant Variety Protections laws which make restrictions on farm saved seeds?</b></p>	<p>seed quality control methods. Seed laws generally focus on formal seed systems and commercial trade; farmers' own seed system practices are often exempted from the scope of these laws. Even in countries where seed laws apply in theory to farmers' seed practices, there may be little desire or capacity to enforce regulations with smallholder farmers.</p>	
<p><b>Are there efforts to ensure a more organized approach in saving the seed to safeguard it from being converted into food?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging farmer groups to establish village seed banks. These limit easy access to the stored seed until the beginning of planting season</li> <li>• Use "seed protection measures" - implementing food relief to prevent farmers from consuming saved seed</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Case study on village seed banks</a> <a href="#">Seed relief as seed protection measure</a></p>

### III. Questions Relating to Seed Production and Quality Control

Question	Response	Related Resources
<p><b>Seed production preparation is not a one-time season, but a preparation undertaken 2-3 seasons before the seeds are required by farmers. Are farmers able to undertake the processes for seed production to ensure seed security?</b></p>	<p>For many crops except maize and exotic vegetables, farmers' seed and grain are not distinct in terms of production process. Farmers perceive seed as that grain harvested, processed and stored, usually under conditions that will enable germination in the following season. Farmers have their own traditional methods of attaining seed production process and quality control. Some of these traditional methods are highlighted in the <a href="#"><i>Analysis of quality control in the informal seed sector</i></a></p>	<p><a href="#">Analysis of quality control in the informal seed sector</a></p>
<p><b>Could we encourage aid channels to redirect their money to supporting informal sector/ farmers' seeds? The EBI/Ethiopian model is a useful example. 'Conservation through use'</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, ideally and in reality, focused programming (donor and government-funded) might be usefully expanded to support informal seed systems to achieve even great levels of positive impact. Emphasis on the informal might deliver the truly expansive gains (certainly enhancing storage capability is one important and concrete step)</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Voluntary guidelines for the conservation and sustainable use of farmers varieties/landraces</a></p>

<p><b>as devised by Dr. Melaku Worede and others post-Wollo Famine in the 80s?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Ethiopian Seeds of Survival program was important in promoting the on-farm conservation of farmers' varieties and landraces, an area which there is now extensive guidance.</li> <li>• The promotion of seed security (for food security, nutrition, other goals) is not the same as conserving the diversity of crop genetic diversity.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>The problem in sub-Saharan African countries is to access sufficient quantities of quality seeds. What is the best strategy to overcome this?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the existing seed laws to recognize the role of informal seed sources - especially for legumes (see examples in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Kenya)</li> <li>• Strengthen the public seed sector through technical capacity enhancement and provision of sufficient funding for varietal development and production of early generation seed</li> <li>• Encourage public-private-partnerships in varietal development and production of early generation seed</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Role of informal seed systems in Tanzania</a>  <a href="#">Role of informal seed systems in Ethiopia</a></p>
<p><b>How do we deal with seed adulteration which is bound to occur where demand for direct seed supply post-COVID-19 is likely to outstrip supply and suppliers react by filling the gaps with treated 'grain'?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seed procurement should be started early to provide enough time to screen the suppliers or seed vendors to verify their management practices and test their seed</li> <li>• Testing for quality parameters such as germination percentage can be done at the site of delivery for verification</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Guidance for emergency seed interventions during COVID-19</a></p>
<p><b>How can we support local seeds traders while ensuring the quality of the seeds provided to farmers?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhancing capacity of local seed traders in seed quality control</li> <li>• Jointly establishing on-farm demonstration sites to showcase the improved crop varieties</li> <li>• Conducting promotional activities to increase awareness on the importance of using quality seeds - to create demand pull for quality seed</li> <li>• Linking local seed traders to last-mile seed buyers to expand their reach and increase the flow of quality seeds</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Is sending seed samples to laboratories realistic in many of the countries as</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The scale and timing of a seed activity may affect what type of quality assurance method is chosen. Large-scale seed procurements are usually planned long in advance, and independent testing of seed quality may be</li> </ul>	

<p><b>opposed to a local screening?</b></p>	<p>required for determining final payments to suppliers, and as a condition of accountability to vulnerable farmers and other stakeholders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seed testing laboratories are still functioning in most places, though with reduced capacity in some. The limiting factor in the COVID-19 crisis may be getting samples to the lab.</li> <li>• Local laboratories, or internal checks on germination, can be used as fallback strategies when internationally accredited labs cannot be used. However, proper sampling and rigorous germination protocols should always be used - this is not necessarily quick, especially conducting a representative sample of a large quantity of seed.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>How can we establish sustainable seed systems among the farmers' organizations?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support farmer groups to start seed banks</li> <li>• Train farmers and farmer groups on seed production as a business</li> <li>• Link farmer groups to agricultural research institutions for continuity in technical support</li> <li>• Forward link farmers/groups to off-takers and grain markets to pull seed demand. Seed demand is derived demand - determined by level of grain demand</li> </ul>	

## IV. Questions Relating to Implementation of Seed Interventions

Question	Response	Related Resources
<p><b>Will we have the capacity to select adapted seeds if there is a great deal of anticipated competition for limited seeds?</b></p>	<p>If considering seed-related intervention - especially direct seed distribution, it is advisable to follow the direct seed distribution guideline. When under emergency, and with limited technical capacity, it is imperative to seek expert opinion from key informants with clear understanding of the local cropping systems. Note that, injecting seeds of crops or varieties that are not adapted may expose the farmers to increased vulnerability and compromise local farming systems resilience</p>	<p><a href="#">Seeds in emergency: a technical handbook</a>  <a href="#">Guidance on seed related assistance</a></p>
<p><b>What kind of monitoring tools are in place to check whether cash assistance is used on seeds?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mercy Corps has a Cash Transfer Programming tool</li> <li>• Studies such as <a href="#">cash transfer for seed security</a> indicate that the approach is more effective when implemented through farmer groups (to ensure</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Mercy Corps Cash Transfer Programming Toolkit</a>  <a href="#">Cash transfer for seed security</a></p>



	accountability) and complemented with technical support such as extension and training	
<b>If large quantities of good quality existing varieties are not available, then do you recommend new varieties?</b>	The essence of conducting a seed systems security assessment alongside market assessments is to ascertain that quality seeds of preferred crops and varieties are available in sufficient quantities through formal and informal channels. The introduction of new varieties must be accompanied by extension services - which might not be practicable under emergency situations, therefore, new varieties should be avoided. When in doubt, conduct a rapid needs assessment	<a href="#">Guidance on seed related assistance</a> <a href="#">Market assessment</a> <a href="#">Seed systems security assessment</a>
<b>At seed voucher fairs, how can one reduce risk in the context of COVID-19 other than a staggering system?</b>	Seed fairs should be avoided as it is difficult to maintain physical distancing. They should only be implemented if proper safety conditions are ensured that is, through smaller groups and more dispersed fairs - and also, seek consent from local authorities. Consider alternative models such as cash transfer and supply-side support to seed market systems	<a href="#">Safety considerations for seed fair</a>
<b>Is there any experience of using mobile money for conditional cash transfer for seeds?</b>	See "The role of mobile money in driving efficiency and sustainability in the food and agriculture value chains," linked to the right	<a href="#">The role of mobile money</a>
<b>How do we ensure that the seeds procured for direct seed distribution are of suitable crops and variety for the target agroecologies?</b>	Consider doing rapid seed systems security assessment and follow the guideline for direct seed distribution. Where implementer has limited internal capacity, expert guidance should be sought - if rushed and not well thought out, direct seed distribution may expose farmers to more vulnerability	<a href="#">Rapid seed systems security assessment</a> <a href="#">Guidelines for direct seed distribution</a>
<b>Can you please clarify why it's not recommended to do a seed voucher fair if the organization hasn't done it before?</b>	Refer to the resource linked on the right which contains guidance on implementation of vouchers for seed.	<a href="#">Guidance for emergency seed interventions during COVID-19</a>

<p><b>How can we have training during COVID-19 before distribution of seeds to ensure they do the planting well and ensure good harvest?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use of short video clips that can be shared through mobile phone applications and facilitated by lead farmers</li> <li>● Develop and disseminate posters and fliers with information on good agricultural practices including planting methods - through village agents</li> <li>● Employ mass media strategies (local television and radio stations) to disseminate information - and also for question-answer platforms</li> <li>● Establish feedback loops between extension agents (public &amp; private), village agents/village-based agricultural advisers and farmers</li> <li>● Social network platforms such as WhatsApp have been handy in exchanging agricultural ideas</li> </ul>	
<p><b>How do you get the government on board in an evidence-based, coordinated and non-disruptive seed sector support response?</b></p>	<p>Through public private partnerships (see example in Pakistan)</p>	<p><a href="#"><u>Fostering public private partnerships for decentralized wheat seed production in Pakistan</u></a></p>
<p><b>How can we build seed systems with more resilience in the future?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Invest in messaging to farmers to save seed as much as possible as a preparedness measure</li> <li>● Establish integrated seed systems with full engagement of local seed producers but linked to the public seed sector and research institutions for technical backstopping to enhance quality control</li> <li>● Encourage farmer groups to start seed banks as fallback options</li> </ul>	

## Community-sourced Resource List

1. [Seed Systems Security Assessment Manual](#)
2. [FAO Seeds in Emergencies Handbook](#)
3. [Seeds of Resistance: The Fight to Save Our Food Supply](#) (a book)
4. [Multi-stakeholder Framework for Intervening in RTB Seed Systems: User's Guide](#)
5. [Integrating Extremely Poor Producers into Markets Field Guide](#) (pages 45-55)
6. [Quality Declared Planting Materials \(QDPM\)](#)
7. [Rapid Multiplication](#)
8. [ECHONetwork](#)
9. [CRS Seed information, including DiNER fairs](#)
10. [Syngenta Seeds2b process](#)
11. [Manual on supporting sustainable local seed businesses](#)
12. [COVID-19 and Seed Security Response Technical Guidance and other resources on seedsystem.org](#)
13. [Drying Beads](#)
14. [Dry Chain](#)
15. [WorldVeg and Asia-Pacific Seed Trade association joint survey among seed companies](#)
16. [CIAT Seed Market Assessments](#)
17. [Assessing Agrobiodiversity: A Compendium of Methods](#)
18. [Grading and sorting within traditional agro-ecological systems](#)
19. [The use of seed codex and seed tracker for quality tracing and authentication](#)
20. [IASC Minimum Guidelines for Agricultural and Livelihood Interventions in Humanitarian Settings](#)
21. [NARC publications](#)
22. [TAAT platforms](#)
23. [Seed and Seed Quality: Technical Information for FAO Emergency Staff](#)
24. [FAO Quality declared seed standards](#)
25. [Malawi National Seed Policy, 2018](#)
26. [Bioversity International](#)

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