

Addressing lack of access to seeds for smallholder farmers

Some of the key issues affecting smallholder farmers' access to good quality seeds include limited knowledge, lack of access to information, high costs of seeds and a lack of seed laws. These issues came up at a recent two-day Access to Seeds Index workshop held by the Southern African Confederation of Farmers Union (SACAU) and Access to Seeds Foundation (ATSF) in Johannesburg.



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The workshop was attended by SACAU member organisations from Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The various farmer organisations were given a platform to learn, share challenges and understand access to seeds in the Eastern and Southern Africa region. The workshop also looked at how the Access to Seeds Index can mitigate these challenges.

“We need more planning and strategic thinking for the future generations of farmers. We must start with a good seed and this is fundamental,” said SACAU CEO Ishmael Sunga. “Access to this seed at the right time, at the right cost, at the right place, and with the right quality is one of the key drivers of productivity,” he said.

The [Access to Seeds Index](#) (ATSI), published in February 2016, measures and compares the world's leading seed companies based on their efforts to improve access to seeds for smallholder farmers. It is also the first index to assess regional companies alongside their global peers, focusing for the first time on Eastern Africa.

Quality of seed can make a difference

“Engagement is needed to improve access to seeds for smallholder farmers,” said Jack Vera, agricultural counsellor at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. “We need to feed nine billion people, and that's mainly why the Netherlands is involved,” he said.

The executive director of the Access to Seeds Foundation (ATSF) in Netherlands, Ido Verhagen, reiterated the importance of access to good quality seeds. “In the past 50 years, farmers in Europe and the USA tripled their yields in large part thanks to improved high yielding varieties – the quality of seed can make a difference,” said Verhagen. He also informed delegates that there is evidence that shows that there is business in supplying smallholder farmers.

The Access to Seeds Index evaluates company performance in seven measurement areas where stakeholders expect or desire company activity, which are Governance & Strategy, Public Policy & Stakeholder Engagement, Genetic Resources & Intellectual Property, Research & Development, Marketing & Sales, Capacity Building and Local Seed Sector Advancement.

“Farmers organisations and the seed industry need to develop mutually beneficial partnerships at sub-national, national and regional levels,” said Sunga.

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