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The Politics of Seed in Africa's Green Revolution

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The Politics of Seed in Africa's Green Revolution: Alternative Narratives and Competing Pathways

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Abstract As calls for a 'Uniquely African Green Revolution' gain momentum, a focus on seeds and seed systems is rising up the agricultural policy agenda. Much of the debate stresses the technological or market dimensions, with substantial investments being made in seed improvement and the development of both public and private sector delivery systems. But this misses out the political economy of policy processes behind this agenda: who wins, who loses, and whose interests are being served? Drawing on lessons from country case studies from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe, as well as insights from a set of complementary studies of cross-cutting themes, this article assesses the evolution of seed system research and development programmes and processes across the region. By examining how the contrasting politics and different configurations of interests affect the way cereal seed systems operate, it highlights opportunities for reshaping the terms of the debate and opening up alternative pathways to more sustainable and socially just seed systems.

1 Introduction

Efforts to launch a new Green Revolution in sub-Saharan Africa have been much heralded in policy and scientific circles in recent years. Significant amounts of international research and development (R&D) assistance have been channelled into technical, financial and institutional support for crop breeding, market development and input subsidies in an attempt to kick-start agricultural growth based on smallholder production across the continent. The hope is to replicate the successes of the Asian Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, based on the promotion of new seeds and fertilisers and, to a lesser degree, on improved irrigation and infrastructure (Evenson and Gollin 2003). Today the emphasis combines the old technological focus with a new zeal for market-based solutions with the aim of delivering the Green Revolution through networks of local entrepreneurs, typified by the rural stockist or agro-dealer.

There is no question that boosting agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa is needed urgently. Agriculture contributes around 25 per cent of GDP in Africa and provides jobs for some 70 per cent of the labour force, as well as a livelihood for more than 65 per cent of the population. Yet over three-quarters of Africa's poor people live in rural areas, and the proportion is barely declining, despite increasing urbanisation. Furthermore, more than 60 per cent of the rural population lives on less than US$1.25 a day, and almost 90 per cent lives on less than US$2/day (IFAD 2011; Livingston *et al.* 2011). In addition, the region's population is projected to more than double from about 796 million in 2005 to 1.8 billion by 2050 (United Nations 2004). Furthermore, land holdings have consistently shrunk in size as the population has grown. Today, the bulk of sub-Saharan Africa's 33 million small farms are both physically small – of less than two hectares of good arable land, or its equivalent – and operated at the household level using mainly family labour (Wiggins 2009; Jayne, Mather and Mghenyi 2010). At the same time, the record of agricultural growth since the early 1960s is poor. By 2005, the continent as a whole was producing just under three times more than it did in the early 1960s: less than the rate of population growth, so that per capita production

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