

Sowing the seeds of poverty: How the World Bank is harming small scale farmers in Africa

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“It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. [...] Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.”

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #194

The importance of farmer seed systems

Agriculture is a vital sector for many countries in the Global South, both for providing sustenance and as an engine for reducing poverty. With 80 per cent of people living in extreme poverty based in rural areas, and the vast majority of those depending on agriculture for their livelihoods, empowering farmers is vital for tackling poverty.

Critical to farmers' prosperity is having access to the right seeds. Farmers around the world have used community seeds suited to their own environmental conditions for generations. These seeds have been developed over hundreds of years, making them incredibly genetically diverse. With access to a broad pool of seeds, farmers can draw upon their own expertise about their land to plant efficiently and respond to environmental changes, such as flooding and droughts exacerbated by climate change.

How the World Bank harms poor farmers

Rather than supporting these farmer-led seed systems, the World Bank has been pushing an agricultural model which benefits big agribusiness at the expense of small farmers. This model forces farmers and poor countries to purchase and subsidise patented seeds owned by large agribusinesses. These seeds are more expensive, demand more chemical inputs (further increasing the cost) and limit the ability of farmers to make the best choices for their own conditions, leaving them more vulnerable to the results of our changing climate.

This imposition on farmers can push them further in to poverty as they can often incur mounting debts to cover the costs of these new seeds and their chemical inputs. Women farmers are particularly disadvantaged by the shrinking of the farmer seed system because they have less access to finance to buy seeds in commercial markets. In addition, big seeds producers often do not produce seeds for the crops that women grow for home consumption as they do not provide the same sort of profit.

Seeds produced by big corporations also place a burden on our common home as they require heavier use of fertilisers that destroy soil quality and biodiversity. Some estimates suggest fertilisers are responsible for five percent of all greenhouse gas emissions globally.

What is the World Bank doing?

The World Bank forces these changes through the conditions it attaches to the financial support offered to low-income countries. These conditions require a certain sort of seed or fertiliser to be subsidised by governments. This can make corporate seeds seem cheaper, but the effect is that money is directed towards big business

rather than small-scale farmers living in extreme poverty. At some points, this has taken up 50 per cent of agricultural budgets in Malawi, Zambia and Ethiopia.

The World Bank also pushes seed certification laws. These are laws that in effect make it illegal for local communities to grow, exchange or sell their own seeds. Instead, they are forced to buy government-approved seeds, which almost universally come from large corporations.

Instead of measuring the success of these policies in terms of poverty reduction or increased food security, the World Bank instead focuses on how much the private sector is participating in the seed market. In short, the World Bank is far more interested in the health of corporate profits than that of farmers in extreme poverty.

Veronica Kiboino, a farmer from Baringo County, Kenya, outlined her experience:

"I cannot afford to purchase seeds for every planting season. With indigenous seeds I am sure I can get the seeds I need, when I need them. Why does the government want to oppress smallholder farmers by abolishing the use of indigenous seeds? Indigenous seeds represent our culture, our people's way of life, a rich tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation. The government should amend these punitive seed laws and allow us to freely share and sell indigenous seeds."

Seed sovereignty

Despite concerns being raised over many years about the World Bank's approach, it remains in place. The World Bank appears wedded to the belief that the only way to feed the world is through intensive, private sector-led agriculture.

We know there are alternatives. Food systems rooted in local, agroecological approaches show both higher crop yields, as well as improved soil health and biodiversity. This notion of 'seed sovereignty' – the right of farmers to access the seeds they need and have always relied on – must be upheld and respected. These food systems empower farmers and protect their rights, helping to ensure both long term food security and greater climate resilience.

One example of this work in practice is the work CAFOD has supported in Brazil. This work, led by the Pastoral Land Commission of João Pessoa (CPT-JP), supports small farmers to run projects aimed at producing and marketing crops sustainably. Farmers connect directly with consumers through local marketing networks like farmer fairs, helping to deliver affordable, safe and nutritious food, as well as creating jobs for rural families. CPT-JP also helps farmers work with local government to improve their policies, helping to address structural issues like access to land and working towards a sustainable and fair local food economy.

To realise the transformational potential of agriculture and support global efforts to eliminate poverty and support a food systems transformation, these local, diverse food systems need to be front and centre of future policy and financial support.

CAFOD is calling for action

The World Bank is publicly funded, with the UK alone giving the Bank over £1 billion a year. CAFOD is calling on the government to use its substantial shareholding to change the World Bank's lending policies, which are currently geared to sustaining the profits of multinationals rather than alleviating poverty and food shortages. We are calling for the following changes:

1. **Stop supporting restrictive seed laws.** End restrictive seeds laws that limit poor smallholder farmers' access to seeds and instead support policies that uphold farmers' rights to save, share, exchange and sell their own seed varieties.
2. **Invest in an agroecological transition.** Billions of dollars of public finance that currently support the industrial agricultural model based on hybrid seeds and chemical fertilisers must be repurposed towards sustainable and resilient production, based on agroecological principles.
3. **Support farmer seeds systems.** Scale-up investment in diverse seed systems in order to promote a wider variety of seeds and farmer seed systems. This includes supporting participatory plant breeding, community seed banks and other community-level initiatives aimed at protecting and building crop diversity.
4. **Measure what matters.** Instead of measuring the increased activity of the private sector in hybrid seed and chemical fertiliser markets as a proxy of agricultural development, the World Bank should measure what matters to farmers. This includes: their incomes; market access; reduced poverty, hunger and malnutrition; gender equity; soil and water quality; access to indigenous seeds; and crop diversity.

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You can find the link to our full report here: cafod.org.uk/sowingtheseeds