

The African Seed Access Index (TASAI) is the first ever initiative dedicated to monitoring the state of Africa's rapidly evolving seed sector. Here, www.freshfruitportal.com takes a closer look at the innovative program and its aims to increase the availability of seeds to smallholder farmers across several African nations, helping to lift families out of poverty by increasing agricultural output.

Organizers of TASAI - a partnership between New York's Cornell University, the independent development organization Market Matters Inc and the Emerging Markets Program - hope the scheme will shake off 'decades of complacent government seed monopolies' that have historically restricted farmers' access to seed varieties.

The aim is to build up a type of seed library that monitors what varieties are available in which countries, improve food security and ensure smallholder farmers have access to a wider selection of modern food crops that will produce larger yields.

The first assessments feature Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa and the program will be rolled out to include around 20 African countries over the next two years.

Assistant director of Cornell University's International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD) Doctor Edward Mabaya is head of the TASAI project.

"We've known for a long time that a key reason yields on African farms lag behind even those in other developing countries is that African farmers often lack access to improved varieties of staple crops such as maize, cowpea and sorghum," says Mabaya in a release.



TASAI head Dr. Edward Mabaya.

"We think that by tracking indicators along the seed delivery chain, like the number of crop breeders, varieties released, industry competitiveness, availability of seeds in small packages, and quality of seed policy framework, investors and policymakers can target choke points that are impeding the flow of seeds to smallholder farmers."

By assessing countries individually each nation will have its own comprehensive database that identifies the weakest links in the seed delivery chain as well as a scorecard to rate them on key points.

One example is TASAI's analysis that rates Kenya as 'poor' in key measures of industry

competitiveness because government-controlled companies still account for the lion's share of seed sales which in turn discourages new start-ups from entering the market. Meanwhile, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe were rated 'excellent' in this category as their governments are not as involved in the seed business.

Seed production in South Africa appears to be thriving but scores poorly when it comes to making seeds accessible to smallholder farmers. In Uganda, the seed sector is growing but is burdened with weak seed policies and regulations, according to TASAI and Zimbabwe's seed sector is declining.

Uganda-based Victoria Seeds chief executive Josephine Okot knows first-hand how the seed sector is being suppressed.

"In Uganda there is strong demand from farmers for our seeds, but we still face constraints that limit how much seed we can sell," she says in the release. 

"We need access to more and better quality foundation seed developed by government-funded crop breeding programs and less stringent policies that would make it easier to import and export seeds."

Mabaya adds that there are 'enormous opportunities' to develop sustainable seed production capacity in Africa with many different investments coming into countries either through private capital, development aid and donations.

However, often these opportunities are not fully grasped because of a lack of understanding of what each country needs.

TASAI wants to fill that void by systematically tracking 16 indicators across five categories that assess the competitiveness of the national seed sector by measuring aspects such as research and development, service to smallholder farmers, number of varieties being released and a host of other factors. (see table)

TASAI's assessments reveal uneven progress across the four pilot countries.

For instance, while Kenya scores well for its seed policies, it scores poorly on efforts to purge fake seeds from the market, a problem that is growing in many African countries.

South Africa gets strong marks for having a competitive seed sector and for getting new varieties to breeders fairly quickly (on average it takes 12 months to release a new variety in South Africa compared with three years in Kenya and Uganda), but scores badly in

making seeds available to farmers in small packages of less than five kilos.

Kenyan seed companies 'outshine all other countries' in ensuring small packaged seeds are available as smallholder farmers account for the majority of crop production.

Director of the Program for African Seed Systems at the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) Joe DeVries says it is crucial small farms have access to a wide range of crop varieties.

"Small farms are the mainstay of food production in the region. Seeds may not be a cure-all, but without a healthy seed sector, it's hard to see how African farmers can satisfy the food demands of a population growing faster than any on earth and adapt to the effects of climate change that are rapidly altering farming conditions."

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