The Politics of Seed Relief in Zimbabwe

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Abstract A decade of economic and political turmoil in Zimbabwe, as well as a period of radical land reform which reconfigured the country's agricultural sector, dramatically affected its seed system, reducing the supply of quality seeds and undermining regulatory control. The collapse of the seed system was exacerbated by seed relief programmes implemented by the government and aid agencies, which bypassed the normal market chain. In 2010, aid agencies experimented with 'market-friendly' input programmes which also created distortions and were vulnerable to political interference. In resource-constrained settings, subsidy programmes, no matter what design, became objects of political contestation. This article aims to understand how Zimbabwe can rebuild a seed system appropriate to the post-land reform context by asking questions about the underlying political economy of this process, examining the implementation of the input delivery approaches.

1 Introduction

In the last decade, Zimbabwe has suffered the consequences of economic and political turmoil. This had a dramatic effect on the seed system, reducing supply of quality seeds, and undermining regulatory control. Furthermore, the radical land reform following 2000 has reconfigured Zimbabwe's agricultural sector. In the place of 6,000 large-scale commercial farms around 168,000 households have been resettled on small and medium scale farms on over 7m ha, as part of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (Moyo 2011; Scoones *et al.* 2010). This has had some significant effects on seed supply and demand patterns.

Over much of the past decade, the Zimbabwean government and donor organisations have implemented agricultural input support programmes which bypassed the previously vibrant market chain. This is composed of private suppliers (seed houses and fertiliser manufacturers), wholesalers and rural agro-dealers. This article argues that these 'seed relief' programmes contributed to the collapse of the agro-input supply chain, hence contributing to declining agricultural productivity in Zimbabwe today.

In the past, the large-scale commercial farming sector dominated both seed production and demand, especially for high-quality hybrid maize seed. The once vibrant private seed sector relied on this sector for its business operations. Today, a new scenario has emerged and is faced with many challenges. With a substantial expansion in the number of farmers and an extension of cropped area into once underutilised large-scale commercial farms, a new demand for cereal seed has emerged. This article asks how Zimbabwe can rebuild a seed system appropriate to the post-land reform context, asking in particular, questions about the underlying political economy of this process. The article highlights the importance of political-economic factors in creating distorting incentives, rent-seeking opportunities, patronage and market power in the context of 'real markets', which are deeply affected by politics, not just the economics of demand and supply.

2 Rebuilding seed systems

Local seed production had to be rapidly transformed following land reform. This entailed setting up a new network of seed producers on small-scale plots. This has increased costs of supervision and quality control, although an effective system is emerging. By the 2010 season, Seed Co. had 170 growers, down from 400 when the industry was doing well and Pioneer had 40 growers down from close to 150 when the industry

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Table 1 **Maize seed production trends**

Season	Seed produced/sales (tonnes)
2002/03	45,000
2003/04	22,000
2006/07	43,000
2007/08	50,000
2008/09	32,000
2009/10	22,672
2010/11	55,263

Source: Mutonodzo-Davies (2010)

was doing well.[1] For a number of the years prior to 2010, seed production was depressed (Table 1), and as result, a large amount of seed had to be imported. For example, in 2009, between 15,000 and 20,000 tonnes of maize seed was imported through formal channels, while a substantial additional amount was imported illegally across borders (Sperling *et al.* 2009). Following economic stabilisation from 2009, maize seed production rebounded and it currently exceeds national requirements of around 40,000 tonnes.

Another effect of the economic decline over the last decade or more has been the collapse in the seed delivery system that had evolved in previous decades. This was based on a large network of agro-dealers, the village retailers who sell seeds, fertilisers and farm tools, which private companies are linked to. This network was highly effective in delivering quality seed at competitive prices to often remote rural areas. In 2000, 374 wholesalers and 2,057 agro-dealers were registered with the Seed Services. By 2010, less than 100 wholesalers and only 300 agro-dealers were registered, with most linked to large supermarkets and other larger retailers, and the majority located in urban centres rather than rural areas. A combination of hyperinflation, the operation of a cash economy and arbitrary price controls imposed by government and enforced by the security services meant that many businesses collapsed. They have not yet revived and, as highlighted later, elements of the current 'recovery' programme are undermining this further.

During the period 2005–2009, most farmers relied on informal seed systems. This involved a growth in seed saving, and a significant decline in the use and yearly purchasing of hybrid seed. Seed reuse, and particularly the growth in open pollinated varieties (OPV) of maize seed, has been significant. Over this period, the over 90 per cent adoption rate of hybrid maize in the smallholder sector declined to 80 per cent, with a growth in OPV seed use increasing to 30 per cent of the area planted to sorghum, and 27 per cent of the area planted to pearl millet in Zimbabwe (Sperling *et al.* 2009). In addition, there has been a growth in demand for sorghum and millet seeds, mostly supplied through informal systems. Informal systems have extended to largely illegal imports of seeds of variable quality from South Africa (Sperling *et al.* 2009; Langyintuo *et al.* 2008; Mano 2006).

Today, there are new farmers with new demands, combined with a new supply environment based on a restructured private sector. How should policy respond to this situation? What is the most effective route to recovery? The following sections explore the policy responses, both by government and donors/NGOs. Much of this has been framed as an 'emergency', 'humanitarian' response, where seed 'relief' is considered as part of 'social protection' programmes which aim at providing immediate relief, but also the prospect of longer-term recovery. The following sections explore the experience.

3 The politics of seed relief programmes

Over the last decade, the government has been a major player in the provision of agricultural inputs, partly as a drought response initiative and also partly to buttress the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) (Rohrbach *et al.*

Table 2 Proportion of households and quantity of inputs distributed by NGOs 2004–2010

Year	Households supported (%)	Cereal seed (tonnes)			Fertilisers
		Maize		Small grains	
		OPV	Hybrid		
2003/04	65	3,304	3,061	2,835	7,737
2004/05	28	1,972	291	847	5,828
2005/06	24	1,605	31	771	8,626
2006/07	21	696	175	981	9,049
2007/08	15	307	138	1,119	8,598
2008/09	20	1,282	54	939	15,509
2009/10	48	5,877	641	1,157	51,356

Source: FAO Database (2010)

2004; Govere *et al.* 2009; Hanyani-Mlambo and Hobane 2010).

A whole plethora of schemes have been implemented, mainly through parastatals such as the Grain Marketing Board and District Development Fund (DDF). In some instances, the crop inputs would be provided free of charge and in other cases, they were heavily subsidised. In 2004, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) became a major financier of agricultural programmes through the launching of the Productive Sector Facility (PSF) and later the Agricultural Sector Productivity Enhancement Facility (ASPEF), both agricultural input support schemes aimed at cushioning farmers against the high input prices caused by massive inflation rates. In 2005, the government launched Operation Maguta/Inala, a military-led programme supporting farmers with tillage, seeds and fertilisers, with mechanisation a strong pillar. For the 2008/09 season, a successor programme, the Champion Farmer Programme, targeted farmers capable of achieving high yields. During the 2009/10 season, the government implemented a subsidised agricultural input scheme through GMB. Farmers could buy a 10kg pack of maize seed at US$5 against an open market price of US$20 and a 50kg bag of fertiliser at US$7 against an open market price of US$28. Also in 2009/10 the government implemented the Presidential Well-Wishers Programme which provided input packs comprising maize or sorghum or finger millet and bean seed, together with basal fertiliser. A common feature of all government programmes was that inputs were acquired in bulk from local or international input suppliers for distribution through the GMB network of depots, largely bypassing the normal agricultural input distribution chain which involves wholesalers and agro-dealers.

This was also a feature of most NGO schemes supported by donors. Table 2 gives a breakdown of the number of households provided with free or heavily subsidised inputs since the 2003/04 cropping season, by NGOs. The proportion of all smallholder farming households supported ranged from 65 per cent in 2003/04 to about 15 per cent in 2007/08. The average contribution to the maize area planted over the years was 7 per cent.

NGOs mainly distributed open pollinated maize varieties (OPV) and small grains after 2003/04. In an effort to capture the lucrative NGO market, most seed companies started producing OPV maize seed. According to the seed situation report by the Zimbabwe Seed Traders Association, 10 of the 11 companies which produced seed in 2010 produced some OPV maize seed.[2] The dominant strategy used to deliver inputs to beneficiary households during this period was direct distribution. NGOs centrally procured inputs mainly directly from seed or fertiliser companies, again undermining rural agro-dealers.

Table 3 **Proportion of smallholder households which accessed inputs by source**

District	Purchases (%)	NGO (%)	Government (%)	NGO or Government (%)
Beitbridge	38.3		41.1	41.1
Chivi	64.2	47.5	22.5	58.3
Gokwe South	62.7	28.7	57.3	74.0
Goromonzi	54.7	60.7	28.0	74.0
Overall	55.8	36.4	37.8	64.0

Source: 1st Round Crop Assessment (2011)

However, in the last season, when seed production rebounded, not all seed was being absorbed by relief programmes. The average maize area planted has been around 1.6m ha, giving a seed requirement of 40,000 tonnes. There has thus been no 'seed supply gap', and seed houses once again attempted to revitalise connections via rural agro-dealers. But such businesses had to compete with directly distributed 'relief seed'. Recognising this problem, a number of market-based inputs have emerged, particularly following the stabilisation of the economy from 2009. These include:

- Providing farmers with inputs on credit with the farmers delivering a portion of their produce equivalent to input support provided
- Seed fairs, where vouchers provided by NGOs to vulnerable members of the community were exchanged for inputs supplied by commercial and informal traders and
- Vouchers redeemable for inputs through rural agro-dealers.

4 Seed relief: experiences from the ground

In order to explore how seed relief programmes played out in reality during 2010/11, four case study sites were chosen (Figure 1): two in high potential areas (in the north) and the other two in low potential areas (in the south).

The research involved reviewing secondary information, discussions with a cross-section of stakeholders, NGOs, donors, input suppliers, agro-dealers, wholesalers, government officials, attending meetings organised by the various implementing agencies and field visits. The study was complemented by analysis of household data on sources and quantities of inputs collected from 527 households from the four case study sites.[3]

Across the sites, different mechanisms were used. The low potential sites were dominated by direct distribution or commodity-based vouchers, while the higher potential sites had exposure to market-oriented approaches supported by NGOs. The distribution approaches employed in high potential areas meant that farmers had a choice on which inputs to purchase, whereas in low potential areas, government and NGO technocrats determined what inputs were ideal beneficiaries. For example, in Goromonzi, a total of 10,000 communal households received vouchers redeemable at local agro-dealers, of which 9,000 received paper-based vouchers and 1,000 households received electronically-redeemable vouchers. In Gokwe South, another high potential area, 20,366 households received vouchers from NGOs, with only 5,000 households receiving direct support via NGOs.

In some sites, there was a flood of initiatives. For example in Chivi, around 17,000 households were supported by NGOs and 16,000 households by government, some receiving support from both. Most received support through commodity-based voucher schemes, although there are some who received direct support. NGOs were not interested in distributing agricultural inputs in Beitbridge, which is predominantly extremely dry.

In 2010/11, and for the first time in many years, agro-dealers played a role delivering agricultural inputs. Around 55.8 per cent of the households engaged the market to access inputs (seed or fertiliser) (Table 3). Suprisingly, the greatest proportion of households which purchased inputs was found in the low potential area of Chivi, but this can partly be explained by the fact that aid agencies distributed seed (sorghum and legumes) which is not preferred by farmers, hence farmers engaged the market to buy maize seed.

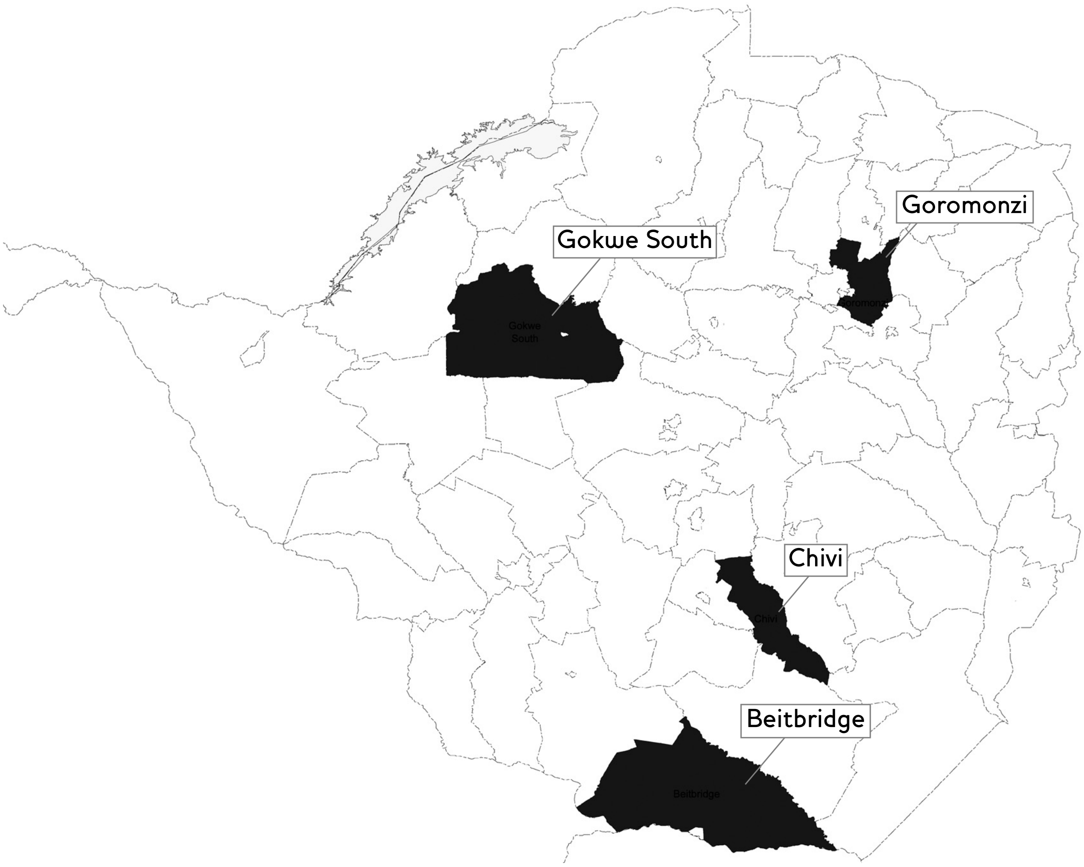
Table 4 Experiences of seed relief programmes

Programmes	Intended objectives	Unintended consequences
Government Social Assistance Scheme (free) – 10kg of maize/5kg of sorghum seed, 50kg of Compound D and 50kg AN fertiliser	• Inputs are provided to vulnerable communal households without excess labour for public works • Appropriate varieties are distributed due to technical expertise at the government's disposal • Benefit the most vulnerable smallholder farmers	• Partisan beneficiary selection. Untimely distribution of inputs • Distortion of input markets. Leakages and rent-seeking • Create dependency on free inputs
Government Subsidised Input Programme – 10kg of maize/5kg of sorghum seed (US$5), 50kg of Compound D and AN fertiliser each (US$15)	• Benefit transitory poor farmers who, because of the structural changes in the economy, could not afford to buy inputs • Reduce dependency syndrome	• Untimely distribution of inputs. Distortion of input markets • Leakages and rent-seeking • Difficult to target
Value Based Voucher Input Scheme – either US$60: 10kg of maize seed, 50kg of fertiliser (AN or Compound D) or US$70: 10kg of OPV maize seed, 50kg of Compound D and 50kg AN fertiliser	• Provide inputs in a transparent and non-partisan manner to vulnerable households in communal areas • Growth-oriented social protection mechanism • Cost-efficient – distributing vouchers is likely to be cheaper than commodity-based alternatives because transport and logistics costs are lower • Choice – farmers decide on what to buy, therefore they access preferred input types if there is competition • Resuscitate the agro input value chain • Beneficial knock-on effect in the economy	• Expose farmers to supply failures and prone to price fluctuations • Disadvantage those engaging the market on a cash basis • Prone to corruption and diversion, e.g. trader provides partial allotments or asks for bribes • Attractive to everyone, therefore difficult to target • Inflationary risk resulting in beneficiaries getting less for the voucher and non-beneficiaries getting worse
Commodity-based Vouchers	• Inputs are provided in a transparent and non-partisan manner to vulnerable communal households • Growth-based social protection • Minimise the disruption of the markets • Farmers are provided with appropriate inputs • Contribute to the resuscitation of the agro input value chain • Farmers are guaranteed to receive a certain input pack	• Late distribution of inputs – lack of incentive for suppliers to deliver inputs timely because they will have banked the cash • Undermine farmers' preferences resulting in provision of inputs which are not used by farmers
Contributory Electronic Voucher Input Scheme	• Provide inputs in a transparent and non-partisan manner to transitory, poor farmers who are able-bodied and able to benefit from input assistance • Minimise the disruption of the markets • Limit corruption • Reduce dependency syndrome	• Untimely distribution of inputs. Distortion of input markets • Benefit the unintended beneficiary group

Table 4 **Experiences of seed relief programmes (cont.)**

Programmes	Intended objectives	Unintended consequences
Aid agencies direct input programme: ● 5kg sorghum, 5kg groundnuts 3kg cowpeas, 2kg millet, 12.5kg AN and 12.5kg Compound D ● 50kg AN+10kg Maize+ 25kg Basal, 3kg cowpeas ● 50kg AN, 25kg basal, 5kg sorghum, 10kg G/Nuts	● Provide inputs to vulnerable communal households in areas where market based supply is weak. ● Good quality agricultural inputs ● Inputs are provided in a transparent and non partisan manner ● Farmers are guaranteed to receive a certain input pack	● Poor quality inputs due to lack of due diligence and limited expertise of NGOs ● Untimely delivery of inputs due to lack of urgency by the private sector companies ● Dependency relations with NGOs developed, including opportunities for local patronage
Presidential Well-Wishers Input Support Programme – highly fluid, but commonly 10kg of maize/5kg of sorghum seed, 50kg of Compound D and 50kg AN fertiliser	● Support vulnerable smallholder farmers	● Partisan beneficiary selection. Untimely distribution of inputs

Figure 1 **Zimbabwe: location of study sites**



Source Author's original based on map from Surveyor General of Zimbabwe

Nationally, the total number of smallholder farmers which were earmarked to receive support during the 2010/11 season was 1,552,643; enough to cover all such farmers in Zimbabwe. Table 4 offers a qualitative overview of the key programmes, based on the fieldwork in four sites, exploring both the intended objectives and unintended consequences.

Despite the high-sounding objectives stated for all programmes, the practice on the ground was inevitably very different. In resource-constrained settings, subsidy programmes, no matter what design, become objects of political contestation. This is played out at the local level between implementing agencies and local political actors. The government programmes used local authority structures and government agencies to manage the activities, resulting in political capture by some local players. Despite the rhetoric of community participation and social protection, the NGO programmes often suffered a similar fate, with manipulation of 'participatory' beneficiary selection processes and diversion of resources, 18.5 per cent of the households, which received support in Chivi, Gokwe South and Goromonzi gained access to inputs from both the government and NGOs. NGOs also added other levels of distortion, by adding conditionalities to their programmes. Most prevalent was the requirement that those receiving support should pursue 'conservation agriculture', a highly labour intensive practice involving digging planting pits. This was resented by many, and often resisted. In Goromonzi, 30 per cent of those receiving inputs did not dig holes, despite this being a requirement. Local manipulation of the process by community leaders resulted in some being 'let off' digging, while some were required, especially in areas where NGO workers were likely to visit, such as beside roads and business centres.

In Chivi, farmers complained vociferously about the NGO schemes. Farmers said they preferred maize to sorghum seed, and as a result some farmers did not even plant the sorghum seed provided. The germination rates of the groundnut seed provided was as low as 5 per cent according to extension officers. Farmers expressed concerns about the quality of inputs distributed through NGO programmes: 'Why do NGOs experiment with our lives? Do you know that in agriculture if you miss the season that spells hunger for the family?' The farmers wanted to know why: 'Donors buy inputs from indigenous business people when there are tried and tested seed companies in the country'. Farmers complained: 'inputs were also distributed late since private sector companies did not have an incentive to deliver inputs quickly because had already banked the cheque'.

Value-based vouchers programmes proved the most flexible, and avoided some of these problems. In Gokwe South, the dominant commodity purchased was maize seed followed by knapsack sprayers and cotton chemicals.[4] In Goromonzi, fertilisers were the product of choice among beneficiaries, with AN fertiliser being the most popular.[5] 'Beneficiaries did not consider vouchers as cash, therefore when preferred varieties were not available they bought any product on offer', remarked one agro-dealer. Beneficiaries were keen to redeem the vouchers as soon as possible for fear of forfeiting the vouchers. In both sites, value-based vouchers were distributed on time and farmers were able to access inputs before the onset of the season, a significant benefit by contrast to the direct distribution schemes, especially from government. However, the electronic scheme experimented with in Goromonzi was widely criticised. The electronic vouchers were printed on scratch cards with pin codes linked to a central database containing beneficiary details. A beneficiary presented the voucher to an agro-dealer who in turn sent a message to the central database through a mobile phone for authentication. Once authenticated, the farmer was allowed to proceed with purchase. This system was considered cumbersome by both farmers and agro-dealers. Due to poor network connectivity, most of the vouchers had to be redeemed manually, therefore taking away all the benefits which this system had. As one agro-dealer wondered: 'Why was this system even tried in areas where there was no network at all!'

What impacts did these schemes have on agro-dealers, supposedly the centre of the 'new green revolution'? Some were happy to have made some money from the programmes, however the general perception was that benefits were skewed heavily in favour of wholesalers who set up large networks of small-scale, often unlicensed agro-dealers to deliver supply materials purchased by NGOs. But many such businesses failed once the programmes stopped, and many made a loss on the agricultural inputs, as profits were captured higher up the chain. Some of the wholesalers who participated in the open voucher programme had the luxury of having some of their risks underwritten by an insurance scheme paid for by donors. The value-based voucher programme, for example, was implemented on the back of a Rural Agro-dealer Restocking Program (RARP), which was coordinated by SNV.

What then is the underlying politics of these seed relief schemes? Different forms of patronage have emerged. Because the positioning of actors and their configuration is highly political, so are the programmes that evolve. This means that targeting, defined by who wins, who loses and where seed goes, has its own political economy. Narratives shift, depending on the wider political-economic context, on the actors and on the time. For example, 2005–06 witnessed the Maguta response to food insecurity; 2007–08 saw the Champion Farmers being targeted (the viable) and post-2009, both government and donors/NGOs competed in 'humanitarian' and 'relief' programmes. There has been much confusion around whether the schemes are for the vulnerable, poor and needy or for the viable, most productive who have potential, or even for those who are in line with particular politics. There is also questioning around which areas are being targeted, whether old or new resettlements, communal land, or small-scale commercial farms.

What is intriguing about these initiatives by very different actors with very different politics is that the broad justificatory narrative is the same. All promote input-support based on the assumptions of scarcity and the failure of alternative seed systems. Most rely on a top-down approach for delivery and a fairly blunt approach to targeting. And with few exceptions, the programmes are also highly prone to rent-seeking/corruption, and inevitably link and identify with local politics and patronage systems, whether blatant support to particular party supporters or favouritism of 'communities' in NGO programming. Furthermore, initiatives have a tendency not to procure seed locally, even in cases where seed is available at local level, and so are locked into business relationships with seed companies.

The programmes are thus allied to particular private sector interests who are very happy to be the beneficiaries of large subsidy programmes which have been referred to as 'fat cheques'. The private sector receives these without the hassles of dealing with numerous small farmers who buy small quantities, or the increased risk of transporting seed to remote areas where it is not bought. Private sector companies admitted that, '… administratively it's easier to deal with a few big customers than numerous small ones, although it tends to distort the market by removing the competitiveness of local seed sellers or agro-dealers'. Agro-dealers on the other hand bemoaned the lack of business as a result of the huge government and donor programmes: 'We have been out of business for a long time now and have had to diversify into other products which are not agricultural because there is no space to operate. Although this season was better we managed to stock and make money with seeds, but as you can see fertilisers did not move as farmers were getting these cheap from GMB and NGOs'. The result of these initiatives is seed companies neglecting their network of rural stockists and customers while donors and government are crowding out agro-dealers at the local level.

5 Alternatives?

Who has been excluded by this narrative that has so dominated thinking in recent years centred on subsidised seed supply, assumed to be filling a 'seed supply gap'? Our research has identified two alternative narratives which have often been silenced by the dominance of the government and donor push – one focused on the private sector and market-centred formal seed systems and the other focused on farmers and informal, local-level seed systems. These are discussed in turn in this section.

Has recent policy undermined the capacity of the private sector both to produce quality seed and deliver it? There are many actors within the private sector, including large and small companies and agro-dealers. As discussed, some of these actors have benefited from large government or donor contracts, while others have lost out. An alternative narrative emerges from this group, that rebuilding the seed system requires rebuilding the private sector, but re-geared to a new pattern of demand with the right product in the right places for the farmer of today. It is not so much a question of supplying more seed, but rebuilding the formal and informal systems) for the long term.

Actors in aid agencies, government and the seed industry are split on this alternative view. While most agree that rebuilding the seed industry is vital, the pressures to maintain an emergency approach are intense. For the aid agencies, emergency/humanitarian funding is largely the only source of funding in Zimbabwe given the ongoing political conflicts and 'restrictive measures'. For government, an emergency footing again suits a delivery mode which is top down and directed at immediate production targets rather than longer-term development. For the seed industry, the 'fat cheques' and guaranteed markets are highly beneficial. Yet in the last two seasons, market-friendly approaches have become more common, and some important experimentation, as discussed above, has emerged.

Another alternative narrative emerges from this analysis. Rebuilding the seed system so that it is able to respond to new opportunities following land reform requires rebuilding the farmer-based seed system from the bottom-up. In recent times, there has been a remarkable resilience of local seed systems, despite the failures/collapse of the formal system. Informal seed systems are, however, geared to different needs and so have different products (OPVs, small grains, etc.). Farmers need research support and links with private sector for multiplication.

This alternative narrative is promoted by a diverse group of actors which include farmers themselves, farmer organisations, NGOs and some institutional analysts especially those who emphasise market access and how people gain access to seeds. This group holds different positions to those having an alternative view about agricultural diversification, food security and non-maize pathways and agrees that there is need to mobilise from grass roots and strengthen local seed systems. It recognises particular needs and priorities of the informal systems, including the importance of recognition and inclusion in policy and programme design, the need for extending breeding/crop management and extension foci, and the requirement for improvement in both yield and productivity of traditional land races/varieties (offsetting the degeneration caused by regular reuse without active selection).

The NGO International Relief and Development (IRD), for example, indicated that up to 60 per cent of seed supply in their areas of operation comes through informal systems. A recent seed assessment supports this view, thus confirming that the informal sector is both resilient and dynamic with a surprising abundance of seed (Sperling *et al.* 2009). Participatory variety selection, on-farm trials, cross-border trade and seed fairs have helped to keep the informal sector lively and with an injection of new varieties. The assessment also found that social networks of exchange remain strong functioning throughout the season, providing 10–38 per cent of the seed sown to maize, groundnut, finger millet, cowpea, sorghum, pearl millet and bambara nut.

6 The politics of seed policy

A number of competing narratives therefore co-exist in Zimbabwe's current policy debate, each suggesting different routes to rebuilding the seed system. While a dominant version is promoted by both government and (many) donors/NGOs, despite their often extreme political differences, this is countered by two alternative perspectives. The alternatives highlight the need to rebuild the private sector with all its ancillary structures for input distribution and the importance of agricultural diversification, non-maize pathways and the need to build from grassroots.

A variety of contradictions result from the various pressures at play which, depending on circumstances, can be commercial, where the aim is to sell seed in bulk through guaranteed contracts with government/donors; strategic where the intention is to find some quick fixes to food security problem and political when the aim is to secure patronage via input schemes. The current policy process centred on rebuilding Zimbabwe's seed system and agricultural sector more generally is not just a technical-economic debate but an intensely political process, driven by particular actors and networks associated with different interests.

Why is it then that a dominant narrative involving seed relief prevails, and alternatives are silenced or ignored? A number of themes can be identified.

Political instability and short-term planning. The economic fundamentals (including credit supply, collateral security, financing, investor confidence, tenure security) had been substantially undermined in the last decade. This makes rebuilding the seed system, with the private sector at its core, very difficult – a relief orientation is easier to achieve. Uncertainty in the political setting is undermining the ability to plan for the future. Currently, planning time horizons are short, and visions of the long term are very difficult to define, given the lack of clarity, and rapid change, in the broader political economy of Zimbabwe.

Influence of patronage politics. Government/donor/NGO-controlled delivery allows control and patronage (our seed, our people), buying allegiance through 'development'. The UN, donors, NGOs and government – often in separate, parallel programmes – are using an argument of 'crisis' and 'emergency' to promote programmes of seed delivery. Some see these as simply 'seed dumping' and not addressing a fundamental lack of supply. This fuels patronage, as certain individuals/organisations have an interest in promoting a 'perpetual emergency' which justifies funding flows and field activities. Others, formally working in the policy realm, may have commercial interests in the seed sector and may directly profit from the activities being promoted. There is 'profit to be made from a crisis'.

A focus on techno-fixes. Presenting the problem as a gap in seed supply suggests that solving the food security/production problem is a technical challenge which can be fixed by distributing more seed and producing more food. This is a typical Green Revolution-type approach, which puts it as a simple technical challenge, not a complex political economic one. This provides a quick solution which does not look at the whole system or ascertain the long-term social, political and institutional changes that are required.

Limited regulatory capacity. The basic capacity to oversee the provisions of the Seed Act and other legislative provisions is weak. While this may not be the result of deficiencies in the formal legal framework which is well developed in Zimbabwe, regulatory failures do exist. These undermine the ability of the seed system to develop effectively, especially in 'emergency' situations or where seed is part of a political programme. Under these circumstances, poor quality seed may be provided, and a range of side-marketing and other notionally illegal activities may be promoted.

Restricted policy debate. Farmers, private sector and other actors are not part of the current policy debate. They are not within the mainstream donor and government structures. Farmers lack capacity to express ideas and perspectives in policy arenas. This then eliminates them from the policy processes. But also, there is a general lack of debate about policy in Zimbabwe, with lots of parallel policies being created behind closed doors or the various corridors of power. This lack of coordination, lack of trust and intense politicisation of policy debate in Zimbabwe causes problems.

7 The consequences of seed policy

The politics of these policy processes in turn have a number of consequences, as discussed below:

Constraints on agro-dealers. Instances of agro-dealers closing down or being unable to operate at certain times of the year when government/donor/NGO programmes start running were cited in interviews as well as meetings.[6] Overall, there has been a reduction in the numbers of agro-dealers in the country from around 2,800 in the late-1990s to around 300 registered dealers today, mostly concentrated in the large chains/stores and in more urban settings. With new market-oriented programmes from 2010, this has improved, but distortions still exist, and the focus on wholesaler support concentrates power in the market.

Dependence on public and donor subsidies. Reliance on the 'fat cheques' from government/donors/NGOs is an increasing necessity for the private sector. With their supply/delivery system decimated by the consequences of the economic collapse since 1997, a business model focused on emergency aid/government programmes has become a commercial necessity. This results in a shift away from building a long-term business strategy for rebuilding agro-dealer networks and a move to products which can be supplied as part of bulk orders rather than a more differentiated, customer-focused product development strategy. Again, this may be changing from 2010, as seed supply increases, and reliance on aid contract declines, but such centralised efforts continue to distort the industry's priorities.

Rise of rent-seeking and elite capture. Large programmes, involving big contracts and a highly diffuse and poorly-regulated distribution system, open up many opportunities for corruption, rent-seeking and speculation; examples are hoarding and release of sub-standard products when prices peaked. The involvement of senior officials, often linked to the new farming-business-political elite, was identified as part of the problem. Aid agencies, NGOs and others are also not immune to corrupt practices in field level delivery. The capture of seed delivery by elites at the local level has been almost inevitable, with certain local officials, traditional leaders and others in charge of 'targeting'.

Ill-conceived humanitarian aid. Much evidence points to the very real demand for quality seed, even in the cash-constrained markets of Zimbabwe. People are certainly willing to pay, and many more than assumed are able to pay for high quality, improved seed. While there are undoubtedly some who are clearly too poor to afford inputs of this sort and therefore are rightly the beneficiaries of aid/humanitarian efforts, a narrow focus on seed and fertiliser may not be the most appropriate form of social protection for such people, given the agronomic and financial risks involved. Linking such benefits to conditionalities, such as conservation farming, adds further distortions at the local level, and much diversion of effort and energy.

Market and political distortions. Large-scale government/aid programmes act to distort markets, removing the competitiveness of local seed sellers/agro-dealers. Large programmes by their very nature are often poor at targeting, so there is often a flood of supply in certain areas (favoured government or NGO sites/villages/districts – for political and other reasons), often affected more by politics than demand, and an absence of supply nearby. While secondary markets emerge, these may not result in an efficient distribution of supply. A donor focus on communal areas and a government focus on new resettlement areas are also creating geographical (and so political) distortions. While market-friendly mechanisms are being experimented with, these often create their own distortions.

In sum, although there is merit in the government and aid agencies implementing market-based programmes to facilitate the revitalisation of the agricultural input supply chain, overlapping objectives, limited coordination and mistrust among key stakeholders is severely compromising the effectiveness of the input programmes.

Notes

1 Seed Security Assessment for Zimbabwe (2009).
2 Seed situation as at 8 December 2010, a report produced by the Zimbabwe Seed Traders Association.
3 Data was collected by Agritex as part of the 1st Round Crop Assessment (2011).
4 According to an evaluation by Concern World Wide.
5 According to information compiled by Help Germany.
6 Meeting discussions at a National Seed Stakeholders Meeting held in Harare on 4 February 2010.

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