Can developing market opportunities for dryland cereals and legumes support uptake of quality seed?

Crops such as millets, sorghum, groundnut, chickpea, pigeonpea and other grain legumes are important staple foods that are not only resilient to harsh weather conditions but are also healthy and packed with critical micronutrients required for our normal health and development. For example, gluten free pearl millet is a good source of iron and zinc which help reduce anemia, a condition that is of high public health significance in most developing countries. Similarly, nitrogen fixing legumes are not only excellent in improving soil fertility in sustainable way and sources of high quality feed to livestock but are also a major source of dietary protein in the diet of the poor in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. They are considered as “poor man’s meat”.

These nutritious and climate smart crops offer an alternative to the better known (more popular) and supported staple crops like rice, maize and wheat, production of which has been declining as a result of pest attacks, diseases and changing weather patterns. If we are to meet the rising food demand due to population growth, it is necessary to increase supply of diverse foods. Grain legumes and dryland cereals (GLDC) are critical to meeting this need.

So why is adoption of improved varieties of these crops still so low?

This is one of the key questions that experts from east Africa, West Africa, India and western countries deliberated on during a recent workshop in Nairobi. According to Dr. Alastair Orr, a seed systems researcher, “one main reason for low adoption of these crops is the challenge of scaling up quality seed”. His advice to the attendants of the workshop, who had met to develop a seed systems strategy for these important crops, was that they would need to address what he called four separate drivers of adoption – Awareness (creating demand for seed), Advantage (ensuring the seed meets farmers’ needs), Affordability (farmers ability to purchase seed) and Access (availability of seed when farmers need it). Read more