African farmers helping to grow quality seed for ‘neglected’ crops

Though Uganda has some of the lowest agricultural productivity in the world, efforts to bring smallholder farmer groups into the seed production process are helping to reverse that dismal standing. In the process, some farming regions have been transformed from hungry, poverty-stricken outposts to vibrant communities.

Currently, just 30 percent of all seed planted in Uganda is improved. That percentage is even lower in important “neglected” local foods crops, such as millet, groundnuts and sorghum, and self-pollinating crops like beans. In response, the government and a host of institutions, such as Harvest Plus, have implemented several programs to increase farmer access to improved seed. Other new initiatives are also coming on board, including the Accelerated Varietal Improvement and Seed Delivery of Legumes and Cereals (AVISA).

The National Crops Resources Research Institute (NaCRRI) at Namulonge, which is charged with crop development, is working with farmer groups like Kyazanga Cooperative Society Ltd. (KCSL) in central Uganda to produce quality bean seed. Dr. Stanley Nkalubo, head of the legumes program at NaCRRI, said the organization started working with farmer groups in the early 2000s, after farmer-hosted field trials for the institute’s drought-tolerant beans showed farmers have the capacity to take on seed production. He has since worked with over 100 such farmer groups across the country, training them in the agronomy of producing quality bean seed. “Once trained well, they will stick to one variety,” he said.

Stephen Begumisa, marketing manager KCSL, said producing bean seed has brought new vigor to Kyazanga. “It is no longer the place of hunger, sickness and poverty it used to be before we went into seed,” he boasted. “If people don’t eat, they get sick. But still, if you are healthy but poor, it does not help.” Begumisa was part of the initial group that formed the society in 1997 as a community-based organization to fight regional hunger and poverty. But truly significant changes began to occur in 2008, when Nkalubo introduced farm bean trials.

Nkalubo went on to help KCSL secure a 2011 contract from Uganda’s first lady, Janet Museveni, to supply three tons of beans to Karamoja, where she was the minister in charge. Read More