Over the past two decades, seed systems and markets in many sub-Saharan African countries have become a central topic in the public discourse around agricultural development. The issues are complex, and often shaped by the specific nature of the crop itself, the agroecology it is cultivated in, and the channels through which farmers obtain seed. What attracts less attention are the political economy factors that shape seed systems development. Not since an array of scholars working with the Institute of Development Studies published a deep and thoughtful volume on the Politics of Seed in Africa’s Green Revolution has the topic of political economy received such attention.

Ten years after the publication of this volume, it is worth asking whether the public discourse on seed systems development has changed, whether the participation and power of actor coalitions has evolved in new or different directions, and whether policies and regulations governing seed markets have evolved.

We began examining these issues in 2017 by focusing on the policy change process itself, and by identifying policies and regulations that are either accelerating or hindering progress in seed systems development. While we often approached policy in the big picture by examining the role of seed systems in overarchign national development priorities and strategies, we also explored these issues in much higher resolution. That close-up look gave us new insights into coalitions of actors that have a big stake in the regulatory minutia around particular crops, markets, and countries.

At the end of five years of research, our results are only now coming into focus. But what we are finding is likely to inform the pace and nature of seed policy change, the adoption of improved varieties and quality seed, and the conservation of genetic resources by farmers and communities for years to come. Here are a few lessons learned to date.

1. Seed policy is still a hotly contested space.

There is still a dizzying array of interest groups aiming to influence public policies, investments, programs, and regulations that shape the production, distribution, and use of seed. While much of the debate previously focused on global policies for genetic resources, intellectual property rights, and biodiversity conservation, there is now a greater focus on downstream points in the seed value chain: where regulatory agencies formulate tolerance thresholds for pest and disease presence in...
seed, where regulators inspect seed multiplication fields, production facilities, and agrodealer shops, and where farmers themselves buy and sell seed.

2. **Specific roles for government are still evolving.** During the past decade, debate has largely focused on finding an appropriate role for the state and carving out a wider space – and a stronger enabling policy environment – for the private sector. Although that debate continues, there are new discussions around the appropriate role for specific state agencies. We find moves in multiple countries to extricate seed inspection agencies from national agricultural research systems and establish them as independent and autonomous units with the weight and prestige of the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service (KEPHIS), often lauded as a best-in-class regulator.

In Kenya itself, we find regulators ceding some of their day-to-day responsibilities (and costs) both to county governments as part of the wider decentralization process (see Ayieko et al. 2021), and to accredited private seed inspectors, allowing companies to effectively self-regulate (see McEwan et al. 2021). None of these changes are without controversy, but all suggest important changes in the role and functions of government.

3. **New spaces are opening up for farmer-driven seed systems.** We have not yet gotten beyond the somewhat ludicrous debate over the pros and cons of replacing informal seed systems with formal seed systems. It has been a long and drawn-out debate over very stylized facts, often divorced from farmers’ own realities. But progress is being made toward a more reasonable perspective in which formal and informal systems not only can co-exist, but also can interact closely with each other. A special issue in Outlook on Agriculture highlights these issues from the perspective of smallholder farmers (Mausch et al. 2021) and seed companies (Donovan et al. 2021), among others.

From the policy perspective, an example of this new space is the introduction of a quality-declared seed (QDS) class in 2018 under Uganda’s National Agricultural Seed Policy (Bagamba et al. 2021). QDS enables farmer organizations to produce and sell quality seed for self-pollinated and vegetatively propagated crops within their communities under an inspection regime that is less onerous than the certification regimes applied to maize in the country. Although a similar class exists in Ethiopia and Rwanda, neither has advanced QDS production at the same scale as Uganda in recent years.

Other examples abound. For example, Nigeria is exploring a range of market and technological innovations in its cassava seed system that could ultimately shift it toward a lighter-touch approach to regulation (Wossen et al. 2020). This is sorely needed, given that the current seed quality assurance system is costly, inefficient, and weakly enforced.

4. **Seed subsidy programs remain distortionary, but must be reckoned with somehow.** Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa continue to subsidize seed and other inputs for smallholder farmers. Many studies have pointed not only to the disruptive effects of subsidies on markets, but also the weak returns to political incumbents (for example, in Zambia). In our research, we observed this particular challenge in Ghana, where the national Planting for Food and Jobs (PFJ) program seems to have moderately stimulated the production and distribution of improved varieties and quality seed in the short term, but done little to create a vibrant commercial seed industry and market in the long term (Agbenorhevi 2021). Given the political importance of PFJ, it may be that tweaks on the margin – adjustments to seed subsidy rates, introduction of electronic vouchers, and improvements in program monitoring and evaluation – are the only way to shape it in a manner conducive to seed system and market development.

5. **The international agricultural research system has a role to play.** The issues identified here highlight the importance of taking a data-driven, evidence-based approach to policy change processes. The international agricultural research system has a role to play in such processes by serving as a neutral platform on which discussions can be held. This is especially important where political economy factors – power, influence, and control over resources – are at play, or where critically important issues such as gender, youth, and social inclusion are often overlooked.
Several such platforms have emerged over the past decade to bring together researchers and practitioners to investigate these shared concerns at the global and regional levels, often engaging major initiatives such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and various development projects on the ground. Meanwhile, CGIAR itself is working to position seed systems development at the core of its agenda under its ambitious One CGIAR strategy to 2030, aided by the efforts of its own scientists, researchers, and partners to encourage greater emphasis on these downstream seed system issues, including public policy.

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