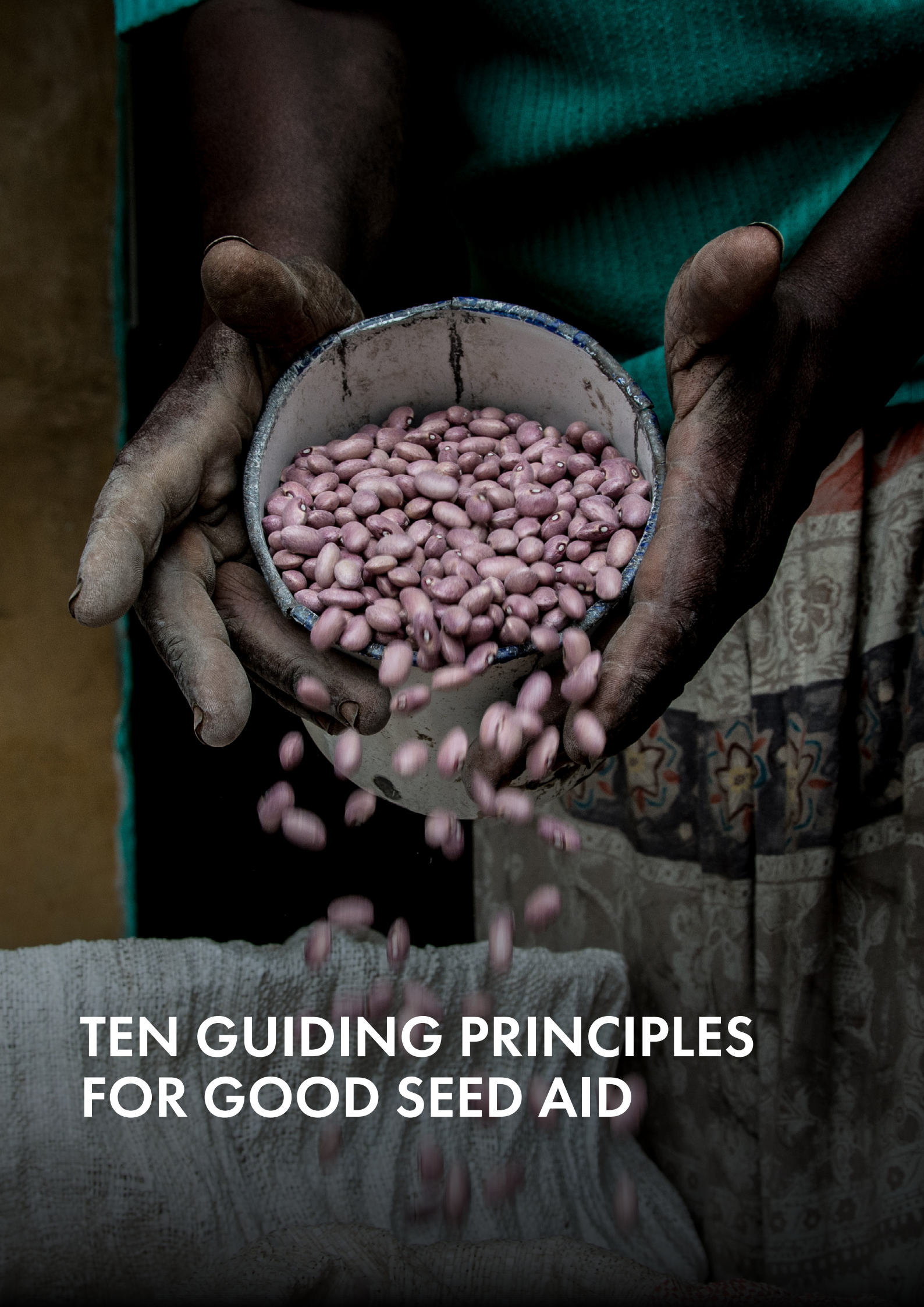

TEN GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD SEED AID

The steep rise in emergency seed assistance

Emergency seed aid was originally conceived to accelerate farmers' recovery from disasters. 'Give farmers access to seed to spur their own production fast'. Such aid was deemed empowering and sustainable for smallholders, as well as cost-effective for donors: 1 kg of sorghum seed can yield 100 kgs of food, or more!

Practice on the ground has evolved quite differently. Seed aid (or seed security assistance) now occurs on a very large scale and is rising quickly. For instance, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) spent over US $ 470 million on seed projects in 2023, much of it in emergency contexts. The USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance had a similarly strong focus: in 2023, >25% of its emergency agricultural grants had a seed component, totaling some $US 115,500,000. Also, (in contrast to being 'sustainable'), in many countries, seed aid has become repetitive. Ethiopia, for instance, has been involved in near continuous seed aid for over 40 years, with seed assistance sometimes repeated in the same regions and among the same farmers. Assumptions are often made about seed needs, and default to providing seed when other types of interventions may be needed.

Clearly seed security response needs to become more effective. Stakeholders might usefully come together around a common understanding for best practice and collaboration.

The Ten Guiding Principles (10P): why and for whom?

These principles have been drafted to help improve seed security practice, immediately and concretely. They are for policymakers, program managers, and field staff engaged in seed security response. Those interested in crop and variety diversity, farmer rights' advocates, and gender specialists also might find elements of these principles of use. Know that the Ten Guiding Principles (10P) have been drafted to help support those new to this area of work as well as those with significant experience in seed system programming.

The principles give essential guidance on program design at varied stages: from assessment to field implementation to farmer feedback and evaluations. Designed particularly for emergency and early recovery programs, the principles are also relevant for work centered on seed system development in fragile states and chronic stress contexts.

The process so far — and moving forward:

The Ten Guiding Principles were initially presented as a component of a more extensive manual. The Seed Emergency Response Tool: Guidance for Practitioners (SERT, 2022) was developed by Mercy Corps and SeedSystem through ISSD Africa to provide detailed advice on seed aid practice in emergency contexts. The SERT, with its 10 principles, built on over 30 years of lessons learned and benefitted from extensive feedback of experts from: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), ISSD, and a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The SERT, with the 10 principles imbedded, currently has published versions in English, French, and Arabic. To learn more about how the Guiding Principles are used in the ISSD Africa Community of Practice, please visit www.issdafrica.org and refer to the recent 10P Animation.

In the last two years, the10 principles have been introduced in several fora, including at meetings with FAO (Rome), the ISSD-Africa (Kigali), the African Seed and Biotechnology Platform of the African Union (Mombasa), as well as being posted on multiple web platforms. With the provision of this focused document, and its wide circulation, we aim for discussions to proceed much further.

Comments are welcome; debate is encouraged. Contact: coordinator@seedsystem.org.

Front cover: PABRA/CIAT / Georgina Smith

Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid

Practical experience with the implementation of diverse seed security interventions now spans several decades. From that experience, central guiding principles have emerged to shape good or better practice, regardless of context. Varied multi-platform groups have contributed to the global discussions to help formulate clear principles.

Some of the central guiding principles for good seed aid practice have been emphasized for many years: for example, 'get seed into farmers' hands well in advance of the planting season'. Other principles have been recognized more recently and emerge from practitioners' learning better what works on the ground. So, for instance, a principle recognizing the need for more market-based approaches (including support to both the formal and informal seed markets) and the need for systematic evaluation, at different stages, as the humanitarian field moves to more evidenced-based responses.

The Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid (10P) are presented below, together with technical guidance notes. All emergency and early recovery seed interventions should follow these principles to shape actions on the ground. Note that gender has been integrated as a cross-cutting concern.

> All emergency seed security interventions should follow basic principles to shape actions on the ground.
>
> Use of basic principles should lead to more effective interventions.

Principle 1 Seed System Security Assessment (SSSA)

Where people are at risk of seed insecurity, assessments should be conducted to identify seed security problems among the diverse groups affected (e.g., men, women, the displaced). An SSSA should guide a decision to undertake any relief intervention.

The assessment helps the humanitarian community to understand whether a seed security intervention is needed at all and, if so, which specific problem(s) to address. Honed assessments are essential for shaping honed responses.

Technical notes

- **Types of seed security stress** The key features of seed security – availability, access, seed health, and variety suitability – each need to be assessed. In situations of stress, it is rare to have constraints in all four seed security features at the same time. The challenge is to identify the driving problem(s).
- **Minimum standards** A set of standards for SSSAs defines the minimum information needed to ensure basic rigor and holistic analysis.
- **Demand and supply sides** Any assessment should include analysis of the demand (farmer) and supply sides and, where possible, additional market system information such as regulatory norms. Attention should be given to analyzing differential demand (women vs men; farmers of varying wealth and land area).
- **All key seed channels** Farmers often decide to use multiple channels to procure their seed, out of necessity, cost-benefit considerations, and preference. These channels may differ by crop. For instance, vegetable seed may be sourced from an agro-dealer and sorghum from farmers' own stocks or neighbors. Farmers might also shift use of channels in times of stress, filling gaps with seed from local markets

if farmers' own stocks or harvests run low. It is important to assess how all these channels function together. A common mistake is to assess supply only from the formal sector channels (government and commercial seed companies). This sole focus ignores the contributions of the other seed channels, including those that may be especially important in stress periods or for the poorest.

- **Main crops for upcoming season** Seed supply for the multiple key crops needs to be assessed, with a focus on the immediate next season(s) and on the crops considered essential. Supply has to be assessed crop by crop as seed sources may differ by crop, just as the effects of disaster on different sources may vary, e.g., local markets may be resilient while agro-dealers are compromised.
- **Acute vs chronic stress** Acute and chronic seed insecurity often exist together in stressed contexts. Indeed, in cases where short-term emergencies recur – in drought-prone areas, for example – acute problems are often superimposed on chronic problems rooted in poverty and poorly functioning systems. Practitioners need to be aware of the nature of both the acute and chronic stresses and differentiate between them. Also, practitioners should work on the short-term response in ways that do not further contribute to longer-term stress, for example, repeatedly distributing free seed in ways that may undermine functioning markets (Principle 6).

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Principle 2 Response type

The type of response chosen should address the type of seed security problem(s) identified.

The response(s) chosen should aim to alleviate the seed security problem(s) identified. For example, if seed availability is assessed as a problem, seed-based interventions such as direct distribution may be appropriate. If seed access proves a problem, interventions might involve cash or voucher-based responses that also give male and female farmers and marginalized communities more buying power.

Technical notes

- **Blanket response** Practitioners need to be cautious (and review their assessments) if they are using only a single response type in all contexts to address a range of seed security problems. The problems can be quite nuanced, by geographic location, agroecological zone, crop, season, even gender.
- **Repeated response over seasons** If in a single context, practitioners are implementing the same response season after season, they need to review the identification of the seed security problem, especially as to whether it is acute or chronic. Repeated responses can damage farming system resilience.
- **Calculations of amount of aid needed** Direct aid calculations need to be based on farmers' realistic sowing rates, not recommended ones. Also, calculations need to factor in the seed or funds farmers already can access. It is relatively rare that 100% of seed or seed funds are needed.

Principle 3 Goal of the intervention

The seed security intervention should be designed to meet a clear goal.

Diverse overall goals shape the type of seed security to be achieved, whether these goals are explicitly stated or not. These goals need to be made clear to farmers and transparently defined.

Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

Technical notes

- **Diversity of goals** Increasingly, seed assistance moves beyond the generic goal of farmers having enough seed for basic production. Depending on farmers' needs, a goal of seed security assistance might also be to bolster household nutrition, family income, and/or farming systems resilience.
- **Farmer priorities (including in stressed periods)** Goals must meet farmers' immediate needs, not implementers' desires.

Principle 4 Context

The type of response chosen should be practically feasible for the given context and adhere to the 'do no harm' principle.

Seed interventions have to be matched to the context. The modes of operation required in a crisis caused by drought, for example, may differ significantly from those required in a crisis caused by war. In the local context, gender and social exclusion practices must be considered.

Technical notes

- **Multiple viewpoints considered in context analysis** The feasibility of working in a context and with a given response, has to be analyzed from multiple viewpoints – minimally, those of the farming community and those of the practitioners.
- **Push and pull factors** To ensure that interventions 'do no harm', seed activities in emergency settings must be demand-driven (pull factor). Practitioners must be careful to consider whether there is potential for seed provision to act as a push factor, for example to encourage displaced populations to return to farming before the risk is removed or before they are fully comfortable doing so. This might be especially true in areas of conflict or with active landmines, where seed is included in return packages.

Principle 5 Timeliness

Any intervention proposed should be able to be completed in time for farmers to have seed in hand for their normal planting period.

Late planting of seed can compromise production results and can waste farmers' land and labor. Any intervention must respect local sowing cycles. Late seed aid is simply bad seed aid.

Technical notes

- **Farmer planting schedules** Farmers may plant over a period of weeks, even staggering sowing according to rains or access to fields, or other concerns. Practitioners should aim to get seed into farmers' hands (not just at a depot) as soon as possible before or during early sowing windows.

- **Common bottlenecks** Common bottlenecks for each type of intervention might be mapped out and anticipated. For example, for direct seed distribution (DSD), there are often problems with contract delays, seed quality checks, and import permits. For voucher programs, frequent bottlenecks arise with printing processes and screening enough vendors.

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Principle 6 Market-based assistance

Humanitarian assistance should support, not undermine, critical market functions.

Market-based assistance should be given priority if the approach can also address the seed security constraint identified. Market-based assistance has the potential to deliver immediate assistance to farmers while encouraging longer term functioning of regularly used markets.

Technical notes

- **Facilitate interventions that target both supply and demand sides** If appropriate, practitioners might consider market support to the demand side (e.g., increasing farmers' purchasing power) and to the supply side (e.g., selecting, informing, and supporting seed sellers).
- **Informal and formal seed markets** Practitioners might consider assistance support to all the markets farmers use: formal, informal, and intermediary. Much depends on whether markets are functioning and on the specific crops and varieties in question.
- **Key market actors** It is important to identify and understand key seed-related actors. Agro-dealers are an obvious choice, but there are different types of actors that also play important market functions – for example, a woman selling local varieties of vegetables, and traders moving large quantities of adapted local seed into areas of high demand.
- **Additional market functions** Other market systems functions should also be assessed, such as information services and infrastructure. For example, are cell phones common, working, also used by women farmers, which might allow for mobile vouchers?
- **Rules and norms** Informal rules and norms, standards, and regulations should also be understood. Where appropriate, interventions should be designed to fill gaps or influence changes that improve the efficiency of seed systems during the time of emergency and beyond.

Principle 7 Crop and variety choice

The crops and varieties selected for the intervention should suit the context and user needs.

The crops and varieties linked to any intervention need to be suitable on many fronts. They should be adapted, usable under farmers' management conditions, tolerant of major stresses, and deemed acceptable by diverse groups of farmers, with attention given to female and male preferences.

Technical notes

- **Seed and intervention goal** The crops and varieties put on offer should align with intervention goals (Principle 3).
- **Traditional versus modern varieties** Varieties put on offer may be traditional (local) or modern ('improved'), depending on farmers' needs and wants, and farmers' prior experience with the varieties. In an emergency intervention, it is risky (and poor practice) to introduce varieties that have not been previously tested in an area, with farmer participation and feedback. Risk minimization procedures need to be followed.
- **Varietal preferences, including those related to gender** At a minimum, analysis of farmers' preferred varietal traits needs to include focus on consumption traits (like taste and cooking time), processing, and marketability. Women and men sometimes assess priority traits differently, with women often emphasizing household needs and men focusing on traits needed for the market.
- **Crop preferences, including those related to gender** Crop choice needs to be guided by an understanding of possible gendered management, use, and control of crops.
- **Realistic management conditions** Crops and varieties should be shown to perform well under routine and realistic farmer management conditions, not only under ideal growing conditions with inputs. Note that actual farmer practices (e.g., sowing rates and input use) may be very different from the official recommended ones.
- **Self- and open-pollinated varieties** These are often preferred for emergency operations because farmers can save the seed from the harvest to plant the following season. Hybrid varieties are generally not recommended for emergency operations as farmers have to buy seed again if they wish to continue sowing the crop. Hybrids should be considered only where stressed farmers have considerable prior experience with hybrids and explicitly want them.
- **Genetically modified organisms (GMOs)** The presence of any GMOs must be declared to national and local authorities and to farmers. GMOs should be provided only if they are sanctioned legally and if there is prior informed consent and expressed interest for using them, including among farmers.
- **No suitability, no intervention** If adapted and preferred crops and varieties cannot be made available, practitioners should abandon any plans for a seed-linked intervention and find other ways to support vulnerable farmers.

Principle 8 Seed quality

The quality of the seed involved in the intervention should meet the minimum standards of farming communities, practitioners, and donor organizations.

At a minimum, donors and practitioners want to ensure that the seed aid products do not cause harm. Two seed quality issues are paramount. Is the seed quality sufficient to give a reliable production result? Is the seed free of pathogens that could cause disease to spread?

'Seed quality' has several central aspects:

- physical quality
- physiological quality
- and seed health.

Technical notes

- **Seed quality** The term 'seed quality' has several central aspects: physical quality, physiological quality, and seed heath.
- **Vegetative planting material** While seed quality concerns are important for all crop types, they are of special importance for the cluster known as vegetatively propagated crops (VPCs). For these crops, the sowing material is not a grain but rather a vegetative part of the plant (stem, root, vine or sucker) or, in the case of trees, a sapling. A primary concern during emergency aid operations is that pests and diseases might be present, on or in the living tissue, and could be transmitted to other areas. Diseased plants can potentially infect not only the aid crop, but other species as well. VPCs are also susceptible to rapid degradation during transport.
- **Avoiding stereotypes** Implementers most often define quality according to the formal sector definition and equate quality with certified seed. This tendency stems from the requirements of donors and procurement departments to show evidence of formal sector seed certification when purchasing seed for distribution as aid. Note that certified seed is not necessarily of good quality (especially once it reaches the farmer), whereas farmer-saved seed may be of fine quality.
- **Maintain quality** Seed quality needs to be managed at many stages of the intervention: from procurement, to transport, to storage, to distribution – and other phases. Seed quality can quickly deteriorate if the planting material is not carefully managed.
- **Seed treatments/coating** To enhance performance, seeds may be pretreated, for example with a fungicide or pesticide coating. And to ensure seed is recognized as distinct from grain, it may have other distinguishing features, such as being colored pink. Farmers need to be made aware of these treatments, including any associated risks. They sometimes sow by mouth and cook seed for food, making seed coated with certain chemicals potentially harmful.
- **Labels** Especially when sourced from formal sources, seed should be labeled so farmers know its name, type, and any special management needs. Labels might also include information on the supplier so farmers can give feedback and address any quality concerns.

Principle 9 Farmers' choice

Wherever possible, farmers should be able to choose among crop and variety options.

Not all farmers sow the same set of crops and varieties. Male and female farmers should have the opportunity to plan and tailor assistance to their immediate household needs and overall cropping strategy (see Box).

Technical notes

- **Diverse crops and varieties** Interventions should ensure a range of crops and varieties are available to meet the needs of both more commercial and more subsistence-oriented farmers, men and women, the highly vulnerable, and displaced as well as settled populations.
- **Facilitating access to different seed channels** Allowing farmers to access seed from diverse seed channels (formal as well as informal) often helps to expand the range of choice, e.g., both local and modern varieties, and both indigenous and modern commercial crops.

Principle 10 Feedback at multiple key stages

Client groups, farmers, and suppliers should have the opportunity to give feedback at the end of the season, and afterwards.

Practitioners should build monitoring and evaluation mechanisms into the design of the intervention, covering its different phases.

Technical notes

- **Timing of evaluations** It is important to be clear about what feedback and changes might be expected at different stages of an intervention. Minimally, evaluations should take place immediately after implementation of a seed intervention and at the end of the cropping season. Evaluations several seasons later can give further insight into more enduring positive or negative benefits.
- **Cumulative effects** Practitioners should be aware that the effects of an intervention may be incremental, building on each other. For example, access to a new variety might lead to higher production, to a larger proportion of the harvest being marketed, and, eventually, increased income. Feedback mechanisms need to capture these cascading effects over time.
- **Budgeting** Agencies need to explicitly budget time and resources to monitor and evaluate the effects of their assistance.

Gender as a Cross-cutting Concern:

Gender-based design tenets in seed system programming

Gender considerations must be an organizing principle of any seed system advice. Here are several of the central gender responsive design tenets for seed programming:

- Recognize the different needs and preferences of women and men and design appropriate interventions for each.
- Ensure seed-linked assistance includes extension programs that benefit both women and men by creating self-learning opportunities to sustain future adoption and utilization of seed technologies.
- Ensure quality seed is affordable and accessible to women and men and that any trade-offs from other seed response options (e.g., subsidy) do not have gender-related negative outcomes, particularly for women.
- Tailor seed programming to enhance women's entrepreneurial capacity to actively participate in program implementation, for example as seed suppliers.
- Design seed programming to provide policy and operational space for formal and informal seed systems – women often engage more in the latter.
- Understand the potential for gender-based violence related to farming and planting decisions, the selling of produce, and the management of income.

Here are other potential differences consider in designing interventions:

- Women and men may have control over different crops.
- Fields / plots maybe managed differently, according to gender.
- Access to innovations (varieties, seed, knowledge) may be gender biased. Delivery mechanisms may be skewed.

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seed system Strengthening smallholder farmer seed systems

ISSD Africa

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