High importance of beans to people: low priority for seed companies

Beans are a key food crop in Kenya covering an estimated area of 800,000 ha/year. Per capita annual consumption is 22 kg/year overall, and rises to world highs of 65 kg/year in select regions.

Kenya is also one of the few countries in sub Saharan Africa with a relatively well developed commercial seed sector. However, while about 40 seed companies operate countrywide, only four market bean seed – and these concentrate on old varieties, released before the 1980s. Because farmers recycle bean seed for as many as 5-7 seasons [1], seed companies see little profit in focusing on beans, as compared to trade in crops such as maize or garden vegetables.

The Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) has recently released four varieties which are greatly appreciated by farmers and consumers due to their outstanding food and market traits and their ability to produce well in high stress, even drought prone zones. The issue is how to reach 100,000s of farmers with desired seed of new varieties.

How to get new bean varieties and high quality seed to farmers: a new approach

Commercial company standard practice is to package certified seed in minimum units of 2kg packs and to sell in specialized agro-input shops, mainly concentrated in medium and higher potential areas, where more commercial farmers congregate. Smallholder farmers have been reluctant to buy such seed, which may cost 200% to 400% the price of local seed.

The small pack approach (100 g or less) had been successfully pioneered in Rwanda by CIAT in the early 1990s. Farmers were unusually interested in the new varieties, and were ready to pay for small, risk-free amounts of certified seed. The action research solved a number of challenges: how to make new varieties, and high quality seed available to farmers; how to make them affordable, and how to make them geographically accessible.

In 2008, in Kenya, novel public-private sector partnerships again agreed to test the new marketing approach – geared to smallholder farmers, and those particularly living in high stress drought-prone areas. The Kenya Agricultural Research Seed Unit (KARI) and Leldet Ltd supplied certified seeds in small packs while Farm Input Promotion s Africa (FIPS-A) ran the local level promotional campaigns, selling seed from the back of a truck, in open markets – where farmers routinely buy food and, often, local seed supplies. Several local country stores also put the small packs on offer.

Results: thousands of farmers with great production gains

28,000 farmers bought small packs in the first season of sales. Despite the ravaging drought, the majority of farmers who bought seeds, had an excellent harvest. The next season, we are aiming for 72,000 customers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of buyer</th>
<th>Bean pack size (g)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>999</td>
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Overwhelmingly, farmers prefer the small 75g packs. However, the Leldet Ltd seed company reports that a good number come back to buy the much larger 400g sizes, after the initial trial. So demand is being created for certified seed per se, as well as for new varieties.

Take home messages:
1. Small seed packs provide a lucrative business opportunity for seed companies. Leldet Seed Co and KARI Seed Unit have started extensive small pack marketing, with critical FIPS outreach support.
2. Small packs help broaden and scale up the certified seed client base. One ton of bean seed can potentially reach more than 10,000 customers.
3. Poor farmers, including women, are ready to purchase certified bean seed if: the seed comes from a trusted source; the pack sizes are small enough to be ‘risk free’; and the seed is made accessible in neighborhood venues.

Public-Private Sector Partnerships: the power of small seed packs for reaching 100,000s of Kenyan bean farmers

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