



Dabaso Creek Conservation Group, Kenya

Supporting transformations to a more sustainable and equitable future: Insights from seeds of change in African food systems

A GUIDANCE NOTE FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FUNDERS

This brief offers insights into how innovative, marginal initiatives – so-called “Seeds” – can contribute towards transformation to a more sustainable and equitable world.

Insights are gathered from interviews with key actors from a variety of Seed initiatives in African food systems, focusing on how these initiatives contribute to advancing equity and sustainability, the barriers they face in achieving impact, and how these initiatives may be better supported. The goal of this brief is to identify principles that can support the evaluation and support of potentially transformative initiatives, and guide future programmatic choices.

Key insights and recommendations presented here are from a collaborative project that emerged in response to a call by The Southern African Resilience Academy, funded by the Global Resilience Partnership, seeking syntheses on the topic of equitable resilience from a Global South perspective. This synthesis builds on an ongoing IDRC-funded project on [fostering food system transformation in Africa](#).

Areas for action

Development partners have a significant role, beyond direct financial support, to enhance the transformational impact of seed initiatives. A key role is amplifying platforms and networks, and curating connections across different scales of initiatives:

- Firstly, providing exposure for the seed's successes and impact may help seeds acquire funding independently, become involved in wider policy discussions, and draw attention to external barriers (e.g. infrastructure issues).
- Secondly, there seems to be a need to provide avenues for seeds to network and form partnerships, which is beneficial in multiple ways. A platform for marginal, small-scale initiatives to learn from each other, interact with various actors (e.g. government officials, health professionals, chefs) and leverage this knowledge from other areas or sectors to create partnerships and form new innovations, would be a powerful mechanism for creating more systemic change across the sector.



Komb Green Solutions, Kenya

Equity in African food systems – what are the current issues?

Food systems play a significant role in generating inequalities at local and global scales. Food is intimately connected with the dominant structures of power (e.g. land and labour), which perpetuate inequalities in food production, access, and security¹. For example, even though roughly one third of all food produced is wasted/lost, ~815 million people experience malnutrition², whilst obesity rates have tripled since 1975³.

Africa's food systems are diverse, including strong cultural links to traditional diets, offering great potential to build healthier, sustainable and more equitable food outcomes. However, hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa is ranked as second highest in the world and the continent is considered the most vulnerable to future shocks and crises⁴.

Opportunities for triggering food system transformations exist throughout the food system, particularly through movements towards food justice and food sovereignty. Many of these types of movements take a local, or bottom-up approach to tackling food and inequality, as opposed to a

top-down policy approach, which can often further exacerbate inequalities. Understanding how to best support these initiatives is crucial to creating opportunities for positive change.

Why is understanding equity important?

Equity ensures that individuals have the necessary resources for their well-being within a specific context, suggesting a principle of “greater support for those in greater need”. Although a complex and multi-layered concept, equity encompasses three interlinked dimensions: procedural, recognitional and distributional equity. Support of all three dimensions are vital to create truly equitable change, without which the world will continue on its unsustainable and unjust pathway⁵.

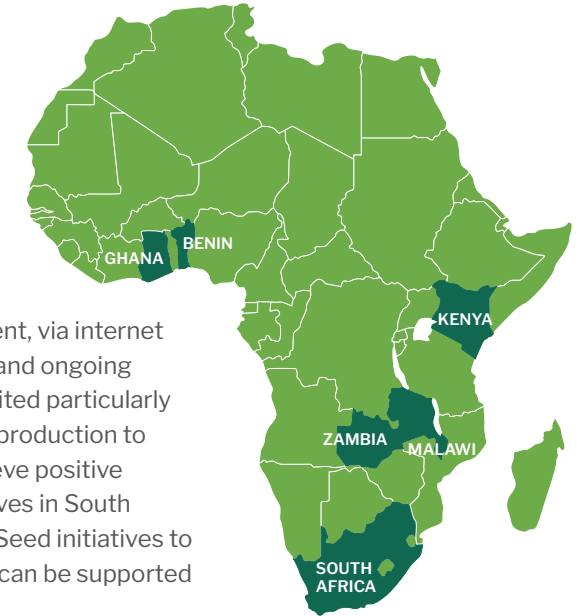
1. Shostak, 2023
2. FAO, 2017
3. WHO, 2021

4. GHI, 2022
5. Leach et al. 2018

A focus on food system Seeds

“Seeding equity in African food systems” is a project within the larger [Seeds of Good Anthropocenes](#) initiative, which aims to explore the different ways in which marginal initiatives are contributing to advancing equity, and the specific challenges they face, within the context of food system transformation in Africa.

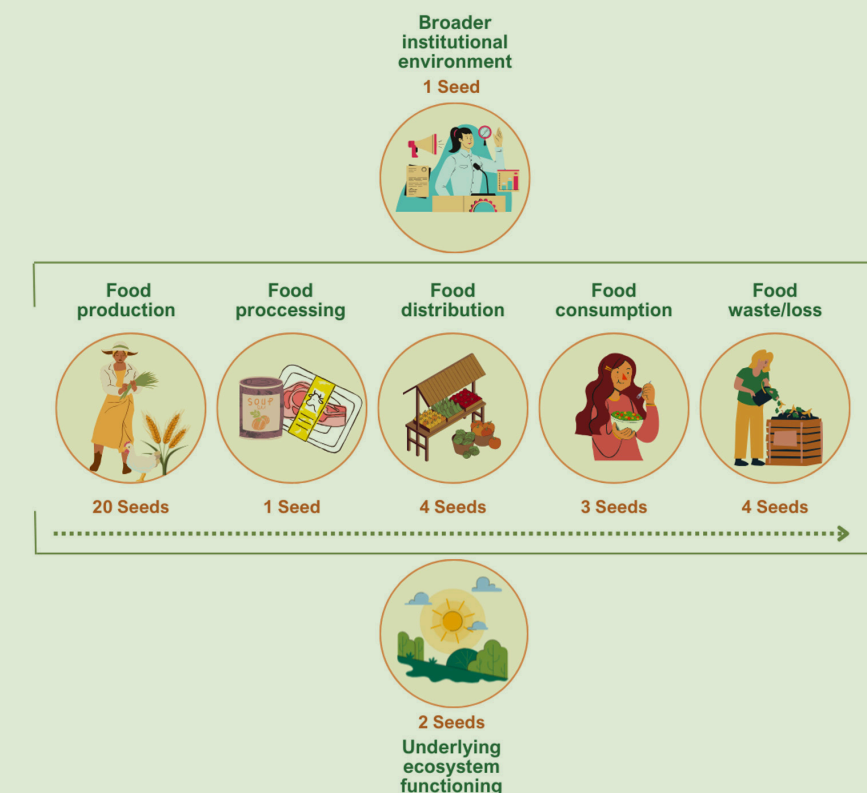
For this project, we identified food system “Seeds” with an equity component, via internet searches, literature reviews and informational interviews, drawing on past and ongoing work. We looked for local, small-scale or experimental initiatives that exhibited particularly innovative practices or processes, operated along the full value chain from production to consumption and waste processing, and that showed the potential to achieve positive impacts towards equity in their context. We identified 24 such Seed initiatives in South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Benin, and Zambia. We then interviewed the Seed initiatives to better understand their current impacts, their barriers, and how their work can be supported and scaled.



What are seeds?

The Seeds of Good Anthropocenes initiative aims to explore a variety of radically alternative just and sustainable futures, and pathways for getting to these. This global initiative uses the concepts of “seeds” as a lens for study and action.

Seeds are existing initiatives which hold potential to shape the future. They can be social initiatives, new technologies, economic tools, movements, or new ways of acting. They are likely not widespread nor well-known and act “at the margin”, but have the potential to make a substantial contribution towards both human well-being and environmental sustainability. We gather seeds from diverse research disciplines, communities of practice, and individuals that have different world-views, values, and problems. This diversity means that not everyone will agree on the importance or value of every seed. These initiatives may offer important insights into how to achieve more just transformations in the future, and are used as a basis for creating positive visions of the future.



Key insights

The project identified 24 Seed initiatives across six African countries. The following section describes key insights from the analysis of these initiatives.

Synthesis of insights

1 Seed initiatives show a large number of beneficial outcomes, to both the food system and equity amongst beneficiaries. However, they need more support to become more deeply transformational in a number of key areas, including:

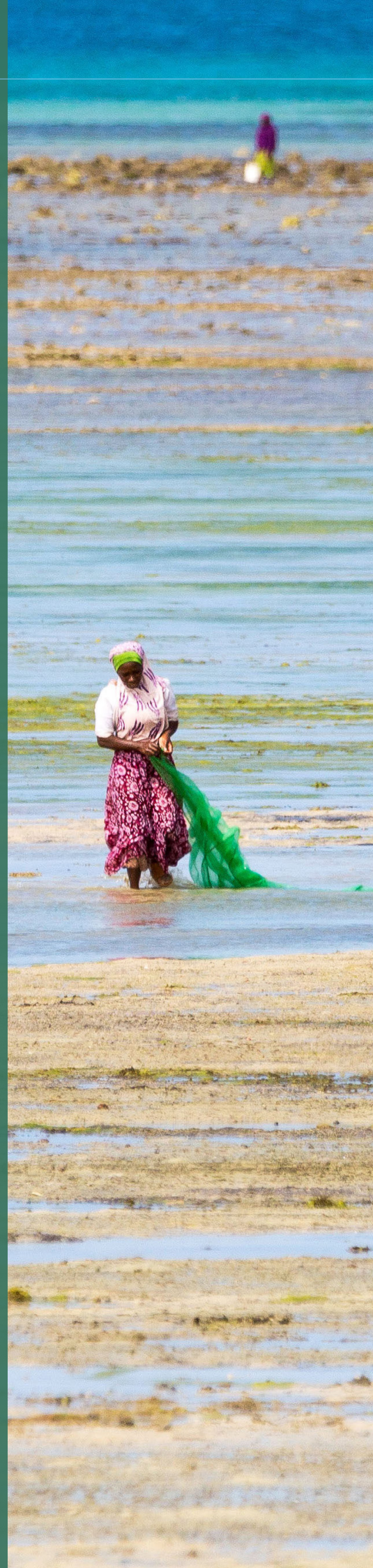
- Improved participation of beneficiaries in decision-making processes
- Greater involvement of both beneficiaries, and of Seed initiatives themselves, in policy and institutions
- Support for legal recognition and land ownership for beneficiaries
- Greater recognition and participation of the elderly and disabled in the food system

2 Key barriers to the functioning and impact of seed initiatives are not only financial, but also include the lack of enabling conditions for them to thrive.

- Misaligned funding, socio-cultural dynamics and poor infrastructure are major barriers in the operation of seed initiatives
- Infrastructure is a key limiting factor in multiple different ways, including reducing the stability of benefits provided, increasing costs of creating benefits, limiting the ability to scale up impact, and limiting the ability to utilise resources efficiently.
- Context-specific funding is critical for seed initiatives to become responsive to barriers.
- Although financial and technical support is always needed for greater individual impact, seeds themselves recognise their own agency in this regard and may not need individual funding support.

3 Our analysis highlights the vital role that collaboration, and opportunities to collaborate, has in both how seed initiatives form and in how they overcome obstacles. Creating deeper, more meaningful connections and facilitating exposure of successes across the African food system is necessary.

- Collaboration is a key strategy to overcoming a wide range of barriers
- Collaboration is key for the formation of new seeds, which often form directly through collaborations between organisations and between individuals
- Exposure, partnerships and networking present as common themes critical to the emergence, scaling, and ability to overcome barriers of seed initiatives.
- Supporting the formulation of project ideas and plans for implementation are important for the emergence of seed initiatives.



LOOK BEYOND FOOD PRODUCTION

Look beyond food production systems alone:

Support is needed for innovative marginal initiatives with the ability to transform other parts of the food system – such as those tackling problems with food distribution or food waste and loss.

The food system is underpinned by two supportive processes: proper ecosystem functioning and the institutional environment. Investing in these components will have large impacts on the food system.

The majority of the Seeds identified worked in the food production and harvesting component of the food system (n=20), while four Seeds worked in food distribution and four in food waste and loss. Three Seeds worked in food consumption and two with underlying ecosystem functioning. One Seed worked with the broader institutional environment and one in food processing.

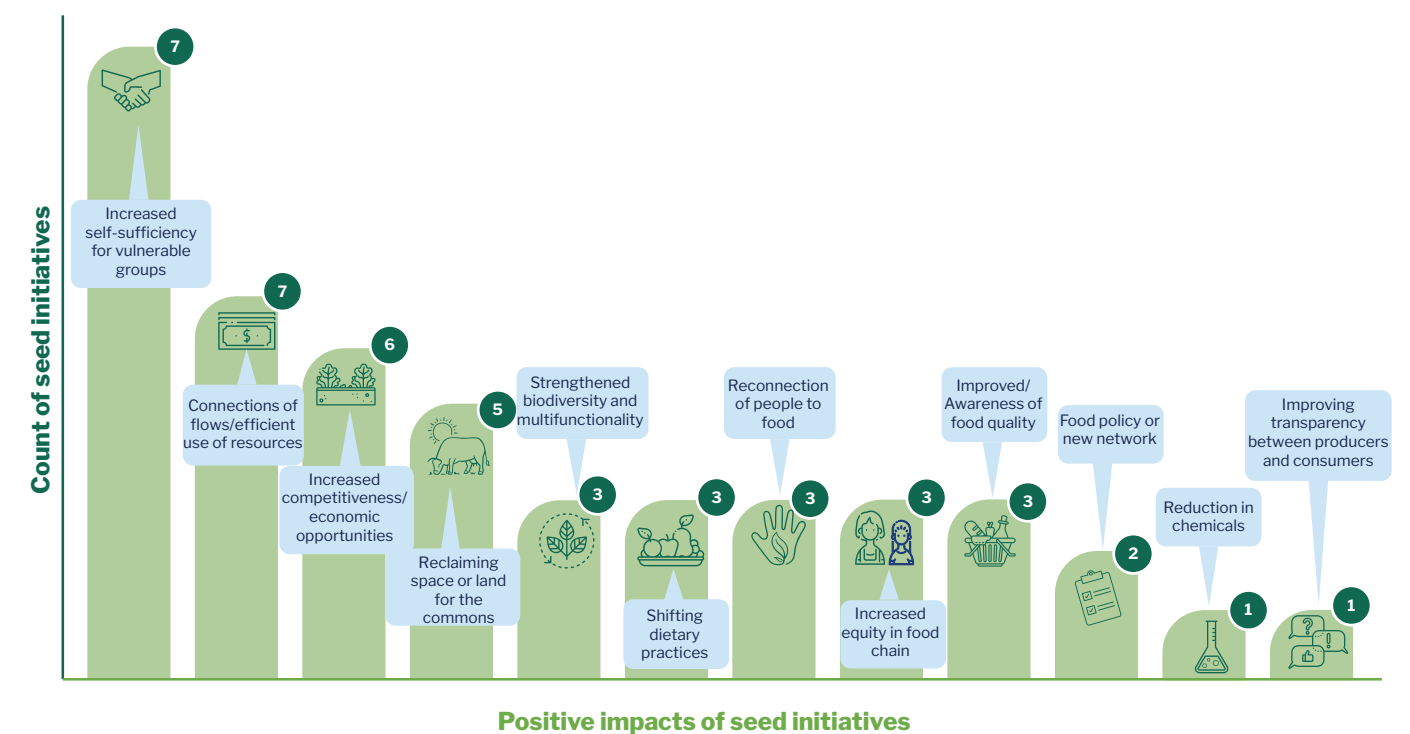


IMPACTFUL MARGINAL INITIATIVES

Supporting Seed initiatives is an opportunity to contribute towards addressing social inequalities and safeguarding the environment, particularly with regards to increasing self-sufficiency amongst vulnerable groups, improving livelihoods, reclaiming space or land for the commons, as well as supporting the efficient use of resources.

observed impact of these Seed initiatives was **increased self-sufficiency for vulnerable groups**, followed by **increased economic opportunities** and competitiveness. Connections of flows/**efficient use of resources** and reclaiming space or land for the commons were other notable contributions. Improving transparency between consumers and producers, reducing chemicals in the food system and impacting policy or creating new networks were not often observed as impacts in the selected Seeds.

The Seeds show economic, social, environmental and political contributions. The most common



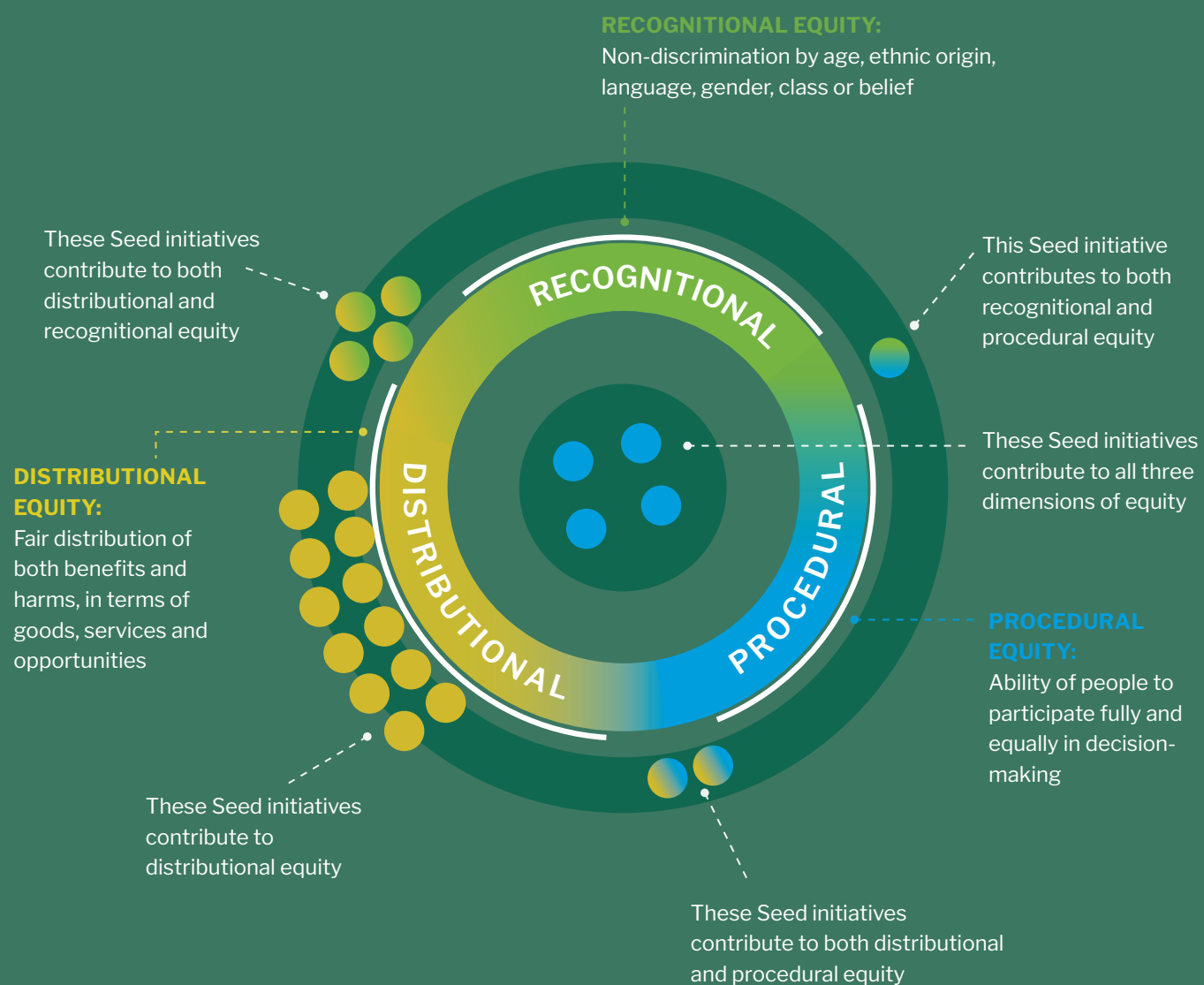
EQUITY CONTRIBUTIONS

Marginal “Seed” initiatives primarily achieved positive impacts to distributional equity, while other dimensions of equity were less often achieved. Contributing to all three dimensions through a single initiative is hard to achieve, but may be more transformative.

Seeds contribute towards the three dimensions of equity to different extents. **The majority of Seeds contributed only to distributional equity** (n=12). A smaller number (n=4) contributed to all three equity types and to a mix of recognitional and distributional

equity (n=4). Few Seeds contributed to a mix of procedural and distributional equity (n=2), and no Seeds contributed to only recognitional or only procedural equity. Procedural equity was present in the fewest Seeds (n=7), followed by recognitional (n=9), while distributional equity, either alone or mixed with the two other forms of equity, was present in 22 Seeds (i.e almost all Seeds). This results shows that **Seeds do make substantial contributions towards equity in African food systems, but face barriers in achieving holistic equity impacts.**

Equity contribution of the assessed Seed initiatives



SEED BENEFITS AND BENEFICIARIES

Seed initiatives currently show potential to support a wide range of groups, particularly women and children, however some groups such as the elderly and disabled could benefit from initiatives which explicitly aim to include them in the food system.

Seeds also provide a wide range of practical benefits, although struggle to provide deep systemic changes such as land ownership. Seed initiatives also need more support to include diverse groups in decision making, both at the Seed level and beyond.

The most common beneficiary group of the selected Seed initiatives were women, followed by children and the general public. The elderly and disabled were the least common beneficiary groups.

The most common practical benefits these groups received were skills development and income security. Inclusion in decision-making, land ownership and legal recognition were the least common benefits. This speaks to the fact that many Seeds may focus on supplying easily-generated benefits, that while individually important, may have limited systemic change potential. The more complex benefits such as land ownership, while less common, may be more transformative.

When looking at which beneficiary group received which practical benefits from the Seed initiatives, there was a gap across most groups (except historically marginalised groups) in terms of inclusion in decision making. Skills development was important to the general public, while income security was important to the youth. Improved nutrition was particularly beneficial to the disabled, the elderly and children.



AfriCereal Group, Benin

Primary barriers for marginal initiatives to create and distribute benefits to beneficiaries relate to infrastructure and also to the dynamics and skills within the beneficiary groups.

Supporting processes which help to improve equity more generally in beneficiary communities (such as crafting skills and platforms for culturally appropriate participation) will have a large impact on who can receive these benefits.

Barriers to benefit distribution limit the Seed initiatives on-the-ground impact. These included:

- long-term unsustainability of the level of benefits currently being created,
- a lack of skills causing a barrier to realising these benefits (e.g beneficiaries lacking the educational level to be able to fully participate in Seed activities),
- cultural dynamics/traditions limiting participation from certain groups (particularly women participating in formal institutions, decision-making processes),
- security issues causing Seeds to be unable to properly function (e.g. from theft of assets),
- conflicts in communities as a result of distributing benefits in a certain way, and in choosing who benefits, and misaligned policies and institutional frameworks



Key barriers to the functioning and impact of seed initiatives are not only financial, but also include the lack of enabling conditions for them to thrive.



BARRIERS FOR SEED INITIATIVES

Efforts aimed at supporting seed initiatives must be sensitive to the contexts in which these initiatives operate, being flexible enough to accommodate the needs that are unique to each seed initiative. Major barriers in the operation of seed initiatives include misaligned funding, social-cultural dynamics, and poor public infrastructure and services.

Fostering collaborations, followed by securing funding, are key strategies employed by Seeds in overcoming the barriers they face in achieving their goals.

The primary barriers faced by Seed initiatives relate to **funding** (n=17), **community dynamics** (n=12), and **poor or unreliable public infrastructure and services** (e.g. roads, electricity and water supply) (n=10).

Seed initiatives secure funding through various sources including individual donations, the private sector, project grants and government programs, with some seed initiatives tapping into a combination of these funding opportunities. However, many seeds highlighted a misalignment between what the Seed needed funding for versus the specific set of items their funding could be spent on, limiting their ability to overcome barriers that are specific to their contexts.

Community perceptions and cultural norms were key challenges that seed initiatives faced in implementing the goals of their initiatives, in some cases because they challenge prevailing inequitable structures. **To overcome these barriers, Seeds primarily invested in increasing collaboration** (n=15) and **securing funding** (n=9). Increasing collaboration was particularly targeted at securing funding and community buy-in, as well as accessing or improving infrastructure.

Project background

The challenges posed by the multiple crises of the Anthropocene demand deep, systemic transformations in our interconnected social, ecological and economic worlds. However, systemic transformation comes with substantial uncertainties and risks, and may preserve or create new inequalities at various scales. Therefore, **it is crucial to acknowledge that actions taken to shift development trajectories can have profound social justice implications if executed in an exclusionary manner or if short-term and long-term trade-offs are not carefully considered.** Initiatives that continue with business-as-usual practices are unlikely to create the kind of systemic change we need.

Exploring positive and inspiring visions of the future: The Seeds of Good Anthropocenes initiative

Peoples' actions are based on their worldviews and expectations of the future. If our expectations are negative, we're more likely to behave in ways that steer towards a negative future. **Positive and inspiring visions of the future are critical for informing difficult actions that may be required to create a more sustainable and equitable future.** Such a "Good Anthropocene" future is likely to be radically different from the world of today, involving fundamental change in human-environment relationships, changes in values, cultures, worldviews, and even the power and gender relations influencing social norms and behaviour. But envisioning a future so different from the world of today, while obviously appealing, is also incredibly difficult.

The Seeds of Good Anthropocenes initiative aims to explore a variety of radically alternative just and sustainable futures, and develops the necessary pathways to these. The initiative aims to support the development of a diversity of inspirational visions and stories about the future, appropriate to a wide variety of different contexts. The Seeds of Good Anthropocenes initiative does this through a novel, bottom-up scenarios methodology. These visions, and the conversations used to create them, have the potential to be key components of transformations to sustainability, helping to create the very reality that they forecast. The visioning process uses the concept of "Seeds" as a starting point for pathways to positive futures.

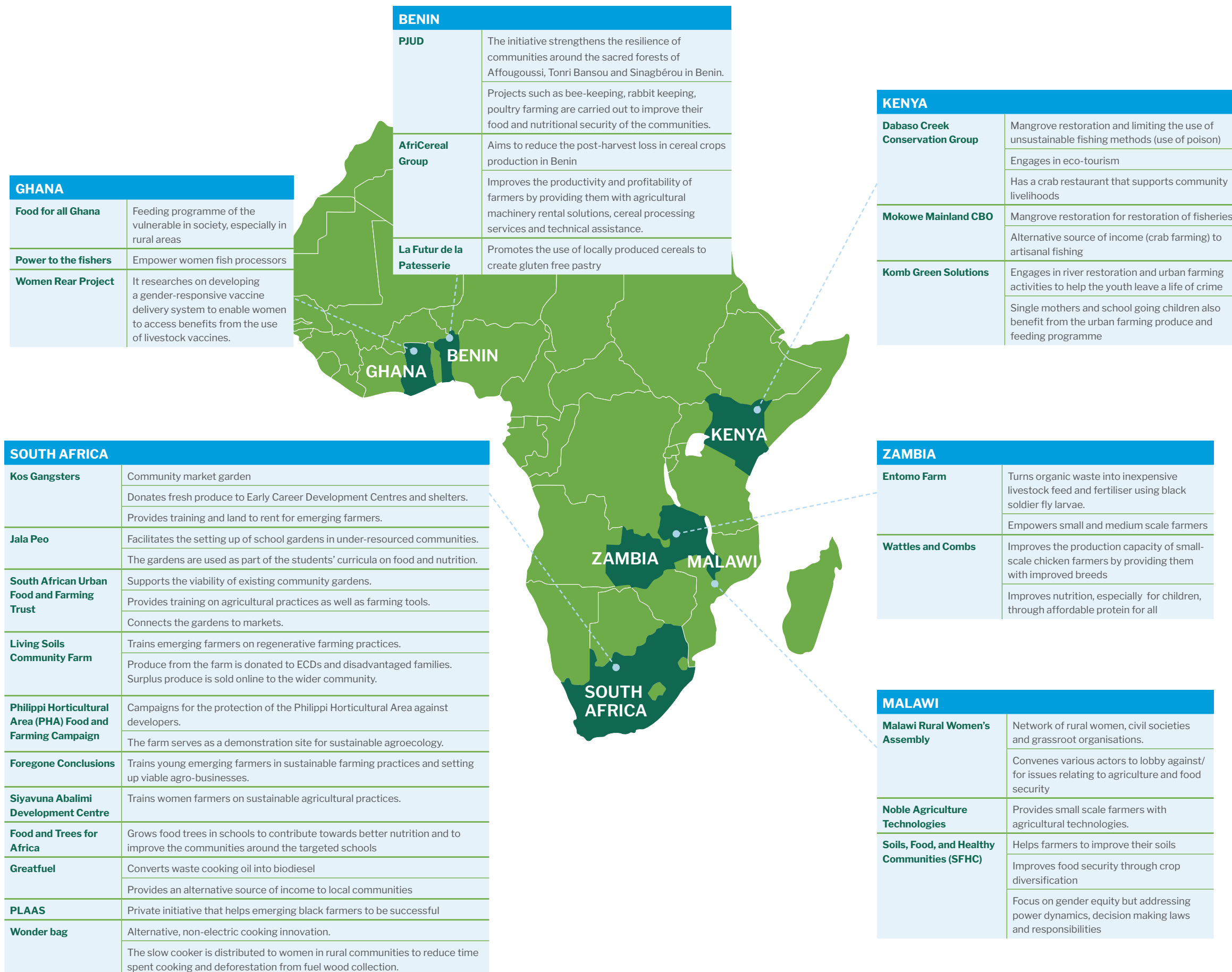


AfriCereal Group, Benin



Wonderbag, South Africa

Food system Seed initiatives assessed by project



How do Seed initiatives emerge and how can they be supported to do so?

Three primary factors contributed to the emergence of equitable food seeds:

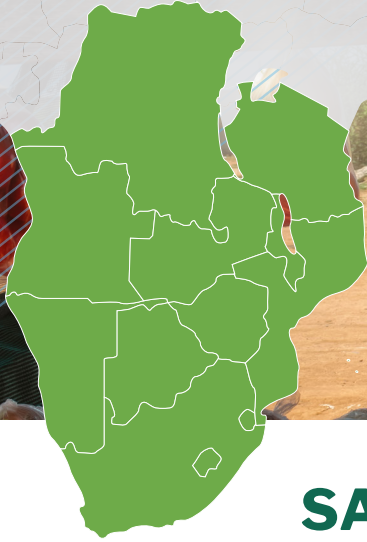
- networking and partnerships,
- community buy-in and support, and
- funding.

These emergence enablers speak to the fact that the majority of seeds were initiated by a collaboration of individuals or from within existing organisations. This highlights the need to support Seeds and Seed founders to be able to network efficiently, so innovations can emerge through these partnerships.

Legislation and access to non-monetary resources played a lesser part in the emergence of a seed, and were not seen as critical events over the Seed's lifetime. Key events that were critical to many Seeds were a shock or a crisis creating an opportunity or an impetus for the seed, exposure of the seed (e.g. to the public, donors etc), and a funding injection. Gaining a new partner was also a key event for Seeds.



Komb Green Solutions, Kenya



SARA's work towards building equitable resilience in southern Africa

Since 2022, the Southern African Resilience Academy (SARA) has supported collaborative working groups to pursue inter- or transdisciplinary synthesis research under the guiding theme of **"Building equitable resilience in Southern Africa"**.

This is in line with SARA's role as a convening and support space for researchers and practitioners working across Southern Africa to engage around pressing resilience and development challenges in the region.

SARA is an initiative of the Global Resilience Partnership (GRP), with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The academy's goals are to strengthen existing expert networks, expand collaboration, and facilitate the co-production of policy and practice-relevant knowledge.

Through its links with other regional networks, SARA aims to contribute directly and meaningfully to regional and global policy discussions around resilience and development, and elevate the Southern African voice in international fora.

SARA is coordinated by the Centre for Sustainability Transitions (CST) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. It is co-funded by the South African Research Chair in Social-Ecological Systems and Resilience.

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WORKING GROUP: Food systems seeds

Our project seeks to understand how transformative change that addresses both equity and sustainability imperatives may be promoted within African food systems. By understanding how these "Seeds" contribute to advancing equity, the barriers they face, and how they may be better supported to contribute to systemic change, we aim to both foster conversations and collaborations, as well as inform development and research funding to support transformations toward more equitable and sustainable futures. We invite your support to engage in this critical work toward transforming the food system into one that fosters equity and sustainability.

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