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Securing Access to Seed – An Institutional Analysis of Informal Seed Assistance in Eastern Ethiopia

ANDREA RUEDIGER

Oxford University, Bioversity International Research Fellow, United

Abstract

Seed is an essential input for production in small-farming households. Especially under conditions of environmental stress, including periodic drought, secure access to seed is central to improving food security and to the livelihood of vulnerable, rural households. Highly developed informal seed systems play an important role in securing access to seed and maintaining a high level of crop-genetic diversity in eastern Ethiopia and beyond.

We present a mixed-methods study of a highly developed informal seed insurance network among subsistence-oriented small-farmers in one highland and one midland district in the West Hararghe zone of eastern Ethiopia. A particular focus is given to the immaterial aspects of this elaborate mutual aid practice, including explicit and implicit rules and norms, motivations, sanctions or the underlying enforcement mechanism. Based on a survey and interviews with 146 farmers, we find that the overwhelming majority of small farmers actively participate in informal seed assistance by giving or receiving small quantities of seed without cash or in-kind compensation, especially in planting seasons after a drought. Denial of seed is highly exceptional and only reported in communities in which off-farm seed is supplied by a local patron. The analysis suggests that the institutional design of informal seed assistance, compared to other practices of mutual aid, sets incentives to use this ex ante insurance instead of ex post food or cash assistance after harvest. Moreover, we argue that the seed assistance through gifts is practised to facilitate access to crop genetic resources in a centre of crop origin and diversity.

Keywords: Ethiopia, genetic resources, informal institutions, seed, small farmers