



Farmers being trained on when and how to apply farming inputs. Photo Credit: Elias Egalame

Inside Cameroon farmers' seed bank

By Elias Ngalame

S EED multiplication farms are helping farmers in the southwest region of Cameroon fight the effects of climate change and poverty.

The farms have been set up under a government programme to improve the availability of quality seeds or planting materials for maize, cassava, beans, yams and plantains and make them easily accessible by needy farmers.

The programme is being implemented by the Southwest Development Authority (SOWEDA) in Buea, Ekona, Barombi Kang, Kumba and other areas.

“For agriculture to be successful, it starts with quality planting material,” says Christopher Ekungwe, regional delegate of agriculture for the Southwest.

He says in the past some farmers used seeds from their previous harvest, but such seeds lost some

vital characteristics having been affected by prolonged drought and did not produce as much as the improved ones offered by SOWEDA.

The expansion of the project to all the six divisions in the region is also attracting many farmers from other parts of the country.

“We are happy the seed multiplication farms are expanding as many more farmers from other parts of the country are attracted to the high yield seeds,” says Ekungwe.

Farmers attest the project has reduced their worries over plummeting yields linked to climate change and significantly improved their production, incomes and capacity to employ more youth.

“We now get the regular supply of quality and adapted seeds at affordable prices thanks to the seed multiplication farms,” says Divine Nkeng, a 33-year-old farmer in Buea.

“With quality seeds guaranteeing high yields as well as a free training programme, many more youth are now attracted to farming.”

Experts say the seed sector has immense potential to create employment for many young people in sub-Saharan Africa and reduce poverty through increased production and income to the farmers.

Adolph Njokwe, a maize farmer in Muyuka in the Southwest region, says in the past two years he has produced more than twice what he harvested before thanks to the quality seeds from the multiplication farms.

He harvested eight tonnes of maize in 2021 up from 3.5 tonnes in 2019 from his four acres farm. He blames the poor yields in the past on prolonged drought that affected seeds from the previous harvest.

Like Njokwe, many other smallholder farmers in the region say they suffered from the effects of intensified drought in recent years, including unpredictable rainfall.

Crop failures or low yields led to food shortages, a situation that was not helped by the fact the cost of seeds was considerably high.

"In the past, accessing seeds has been a major hurdle. Sometimes we could get quality seeds from agriculture research centres but at prices three times higher than what we get now from the seed multiplication farms," says Julius Takem, a cassava farmer in Buea.

Dr Andrew Eneme Ngome, the SOWEDA chief, says the programme is part of the government's efforts to ensure food security.

"Seed security is food security, that is why we provide not only planting materials but also insecticides to farmers in the region early enough at affordable prices ahead of every planting season to prevent them from resorting to low-quality substitutes at exorbitant prices elsewhere," says Dr. Ngome.

SOWEDA officials say the programme also serves as a community seed bank to enhance the resilience of farmers by securing and facilitating access to diverse, locally adapted crops and varieties.

"Availability of diverse improved seeds to needy farmers is like putting money in the bank in readiness for a rainy day," says Peter Epie Ngalle, the SOWEDA Director of Monitoring and Evaluation.

"Agriculture is the driving force of Cameroon's economy, so empowering farmers with right inputs is guaranteeing the country of sufficient food supply."

More than 70,000 tons of maize seeds, 20,000 tons of bean seeds, and 15,000 yam seeds from the multiplication farms are distributed to farmers in the region every year on request. The quantity, however, increases when more groups are registered.

Each farmer's common initiative group pay just a token of 50,000 FCFA (USD 90) to get these set of disease-resistant seeds, the officials say.

So far, 63 farmer groups have benefited from the programme, receiving farm inputs worth over 25 million FCFA for free every year.

The farm inputs per farming group include 110 litres of liquid fertilisers, 500 litres of herbicides, 375 litres of insecticides and 600kg of foundation maize seeds. The farmer groups are drawn from all the six divisions of the Southwest. The farmers undergo a selection process supervised by the regional delegation of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The farmers are also trained on when and how to apply for the different inputs to enhance soil fertility for increased productivity.

"We also benefit from training on how and when to plant and make judicious use of the inputs we receive," says Itoe Hansel, Head of Muyuka Farmers' Platform.

SOWEDA officials say they look forward to increasing their supplies of improved seedlings to as many farmer groups in the country as possible to improve on government's efforts towards food security.

According to a July 2017 World Food Program report, Cameroon has witnessed escalating food shortage and child malnutrition, especially in the northern regions in recent years.

In two decades, Cameroon has gone from being largely self-sufficient to a large-scale importer of basic foodstuffs, according to estimates by the Association Citoyenne de Défense des Intérêts Collectifs (ACDIC), Cameroon's largest farmer organisation.

ACDIC officials say supporting farmers with improved seeds at the beginning of every planting season is the way forward in efforts to restore the country's food security pride.

"When farmers have the right material for greater yields, the results are always positive," says Benard Njonga, the chief executive of ACDIC.



In Cameroon, small producers, including women, will have access to agricultural inputs thanks to the Bank Group's emergency food program. Photo Credit: AfDB