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Seed Sovereignty and Climate Adaptation in Malawi

By *Timothy A. Wise*

You wouldn't have known from the farmers gathered in Lobi, in the Dedza area of central Malawi, that drought had seriously depressed harvests. To be sure, they hadn't suffered the worst of the country's devastating heat and dry spell. Farmers to the south saw crops wither in their baked fields; some never even bothered to plant. An estimated 8 million people – fully half the country's people – are now at risk of hunger, according to the [World Food Program](#).

The farmers in Lobi were surprisingly upbeat, enthusiastically calling out the crops they were growing to a project manager leading a community meeting. One reason they were happy is that the list of crops didn't begin and end with maize, the staple for which Malawi is known because of the country's government-subsidized program to boost local production through the provision of hybrid maize seeds and fertilizers.

Under the [Malawi Farmer-to-Farmer Agroecology Project \(MAFFA\)](#), the farmers in Lobi grow a diversity of food crops, for sale and home consumption. Maize is still their staple, but the list of other crops seemed endless: rice, millet, common beans, soybeans, groundnuts (peanuts), Bambara nuts, potatoes (of many varieties), sweet potatoes (white and orange), cassava, pigeon peas, and even two types of tobacco, a local cash crop.

Maize yields were down, as a blackboard chart of local production from the just-concluded harvest showed. That's not surprising. Maize is a relatively water-intensive crop. Still, all the farmers in Lobi wanted to talk about was their orange maize, which had performed well.

Rich in Vitamin A, the native local variety was taking off faster than the project could promote it. Farmers seemed particularly to like its drought resilience, taste, high conversion to edible grain for the local staple, *nsima*, and how well it grows even without the doses of expensive – or subsidized – inorganic fertilizer required by government-supported hybrid maize varieties. They mostly use compost to fertilize their crops.

What seemed more worrisome than the drought, at least for these farmers, were the government's draft seed policies, which threatened to declare these small-scale farmers' coveted orange maize seeds unworthy of commercial sale, or possibly even exchange with fellow farmers.

Opening Africa to the seed giants

Malawi is not alone in pursuing misguided seed policies that would favor commercial plant breeders over local farmers. Indeed, the Malawian government sent its representative to Harare, Zimbabwe last month to meet with other African government officials working to advance such policies across the continent.

The Arusha Protocol on Plant Variety Protection is now the leading edge of an international effort, supported by western donor governments, foundations, and of course multinational seed companies, to open Africa to commercial seeds. The initiative comes out of the African Regional Intellectual Property Organization (ARIPO), which promotes laws that protect the intellectual property rights of formal sector plant breeders, ostensibly to promote the use of certified high-yielding seeds.

In theory, the goal is to ensure the quality of seeds, a real problem in many areas, and encourage innovation in seed development for food security. In practice, of course, such laws can impose a regimen of high-cost purchased seeds on poor farmers, the vast majority of whom can't afford them. In its most draconian forms, the Arusha Protocol could advocate policies that make the saving and exchange of seeds, from which the vast majority of African farmers live, illegal. Civil society representatives who participated in the Harare meeting warned of the threats to farmers' rights.

Indeed, that is what farm leaders in Lobi are worried about. Malawi's initial draft seed policy seemed to outlaw seed exchange and local sales unless seeds are certified by the government. In effect, the draft policy would define farmer-saved orange maize seed – the same kernels people make into staple foods – as a grain but not a seed, worthy of eating but not planting.

To Mangani Katundu, MAFFA project leader and professor at Malawi's Chancellor College, declaring something that can be planted to grow such nutritious food somehow "not a seed" was beyond cynical. "How can such a valuable native variety of maize not be a seed?"

Thanks to lobbying by farmer groups and other advocates, some of the more severe provisions seem to have been removed from Malawi's seed policy, which is still under discussion. But the threat remains that the policy will still favor plant breeders, and the multinational firms that employ them, over local farmers. Farmer groups, such as the [African Food Sovereignty Alliance](#), warn that such policies are designed to open the door, eventually, to genetically modified seeds.

Lobi lobbies for seed sovereignty

Evelyn Njolomole, an experienced farmer from Lobi, certainly did her part to lobby for seed sovereignty. She joined Katundu and the MAFFA team in the capital of Lilongwe in early June, staffing a Chancellor College booth for the opening of the African Union-sponsored Ecosystem-Based Adaptation for Food Security program. The booth featured large professionally produced posters on the orange maize project, offering samples of orange maize flour and other local products.

Evelyn would later see herself on the evening television news as she eloquently explained the virtues of their crop to Malawi President Peter Mutharika when he stopped by the booth. His first question,

according to Katundu, was, “Does it come from Monsanto?” For his government, it seems, only multinationals can be expected to produce anything of value.

Evelyn explained that no, it is actually saved seed from Malawi. She handed him a bag of their orange maize flour. President Mutharika promised he would make *nsima* with it that night. One hopes he could taste the national pride in each bite.

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