



No. 4.2 Agricultural Programmes: Seed and Tool Distributions

What are seed and tool distributions?

Seed and tool distribution projects are the most common post-emergency livelihoods interventions. The provision of productive agriculture assets such as seeds, tools and fertilisers, often given as starter packs, is aimed at encouraging agricultural production, or crop diversification.

Often combined with agricultural extension services and possibly technical training, the agriculture input support can contribute to **reducing the risk of food shortages** for disaster-affected households, and to **ending dependency on external food provisions**.

Seed distributions generally involve staple crops, with the aim of covering household-level food needs. They are usually implemented during an acute phase of the emergency, to prevent farmers from exhausting their own seed stores to cover immediate food needs (planting for food and/or selling them for cash), or during a recovery phase after emergency to recover agricultural activities.

They can also be a component of development and disaster risk reduction programmes, where improved seeds are distributed to increase farmers' resilience to future crises (e.g., through resistance to drought or disease, etc.).

Table 1 lists some advantages and disadvantages or challenges of this kind of response.



Fig. 1: A man in Tajikistan tends his garden after receiving seeds and training (Credit: Karen Robinson/OXFAM)

When is it appropriate to do seed and tool distributions?

The following scenarios may make seed and tool distributions an appropriate emergency food security and livelihoods intervention:

- The food insecurity is due to a reduction or loss in crop production;
- Lack of seeds and tools limits household food production;
- The timing of the intervention matches with the agricultural calendar;
- The targeted population has access to the necessary complementary agricultural inputs; and,
- Seeds supplied satisfy the minimum quality requirements (i.e., they are safe from diseases and parasites, and have a good germination rate and agronomical quality).

However, guidance from the Sphere Project (2004) should always be kept in mind when considering seed and tool distributions: *“New technologies are introduced only where their implications for local production systems, cultural practices, and environment are understood and accepted by producers”*.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages or challenges of seed and tool distributions

Advantages	Disadvantages/challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering—helps people to grow their food, rather than depending on food aid • A relatively easy programme for beneficiaries to understand • Can be a relatively easy to implement from a programme management perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeds may not match individual beneficiaries' needs/wants (when same set of seeds is provided to all) • Community may not participate actively in programme (e.g., they prefer to engage in seed fairs) • Seed companies make profits from sales to humanitarian agencies, and may use their influence the delay the programme's endpoint to suit their commercial interests • Potential logistical and administrative delays (related to procurement, importation, access to distribution points)

What procedures and resources are needed to implement a seed and tool distribution?

In addition to the usual project management standards, the following criteria must be present for a seed and tool distribution programme to be viable:

- Assessment of the *actual* seed and tool requirements (to avoid knee-jerk responses);
- Identification of seed types and quantities required to make an impact;
- Identification of seed/tool suppliers (quotations, invitations to tender, etc);
- Quality check of seeds if they are not officially certified (by laboratory analysis) – a germination test may be required;
- Provision of seed varieties that are adapted to the local environment and systems (see Box 1); and,
- Elaboration of a distribution plan with a logistics team (e.g., transport, daily workers for loading, unloading, etc).

If implemented through a credit system, the following areas need to be considered:

- Creation of community-run committees for refunding beneficiaries;
- Identification of rate of return and way to use refunded seeds (e.g., seed banks); and
- Establishing a formal agreement with beneficiaries.

Box 1: The importance of distributing the right seed varieties

It is crucial to select appropriate seed varieties for distribution to farmers in seed and tool programmes. This was demonstrated in southern Sudan in the 1990s, where seeds and tools were widely distributed to increase the war-torn population's food security. *Serena*, an improved sorghum variety specifically developed in the early 1960s to address the hunger gap, was multiplied in Western Equatoria and distributed to other southern provinces, such as Bahr-el-Ghazal. Despite continued distributions of this variety for more than ten years, farmers have largely continued to plant seeds of their own preferred local varieties.

Several reasons are cited for the limited adoption of *Serena*. A major problem was the choice of crop and the mistaken assumption that because the seeds were being grown in southern Sudan, they were local and hence adapted. Although *Serena* was once a popular cash crop for Western Equatorial farmers who had access to the Juba market, closure of this market caused production to decline. In addition, cassava is the major staple for people in Western Equatoria. The agro-ecology in Bahr el Ghazal is also different to that in Western Equatoria, and farmers have their own local varieties that are not only better adapted to the area's low fertility sandy soils, but also taste and store better than *Serena*.

(SOURCE: Seed security in southern Sudan. Field Exchange, Issue No 19, July 2003. p12. <http://fex.ennonline.net/19/seed.aspx>)

What are the expected outputs or outcomes of a seed and tool distribution programme?

Potential outputs/outcomes of a seed and tool distribution programme include the following:

- Improved access to planting materials and tools for vulnerable farming households;
- Increased size of cropping area that will help enhance food provisions at the next harvest season; and,
- Revitalised agricultural activity and thus enhanced livelihoods.

Some examples of seed and tool distribution by Oxfam GB include:

- Eritrea—Emergency distribution in 2007 of short maturation seeds to assist farmers in Debub already affected by drought, to help them recover from hail damage to their long cycle crops.
- Pakistan—Seed and tool distribution to support sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable households affected by the 2008 food price crisis.

Where can I find further reading and more detailed information?

Oxfam EFSL Rough Guides: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– 4.1 Agricultural Support Programmes– 4.4 Germination Test	The Sphere Project 2004. <i>Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response</i> . (Chapter 1) www.sphereproject.org
ODI 1996. <i>Seed provision during and after emergencies</i> . Good Practice Review 4	Johnson D. 1998. <i>Distributing seeds and tools in an emergency</i> . Oxfam, Oxford.

Who can I contact for more information and guidance?

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