

Global seed companies address climate change and nutritional needs

Press release by the Access to Seeds Foundation

Global seed companies are adapting their products to combat the impact of climate change and address nutritional needs. But, according to a new study, limited access to quality seed in many emerging economies persists, with the global seed industry reaching only 10% of the world's smallholder farmers.

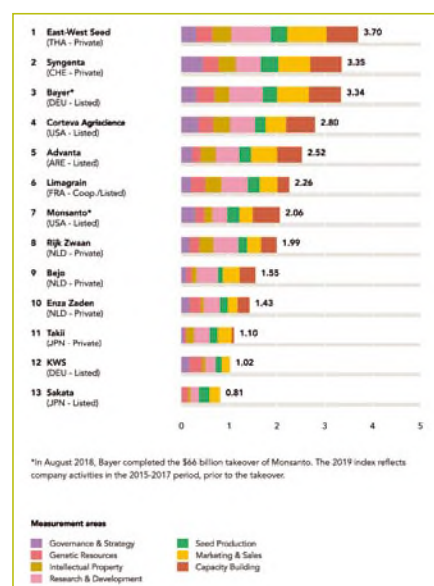
The Access to Seeds Index 2019 – Global Seed Companies, published by the Amsterdam-based Access to Seeds Foundation, evaluates 13 leading global seed companies to focus on areas where the industry can do more to uplift smallholder farmer productivity, improve nutrition and mitigate the effects of climate change, through the development and dissemination of quality seed.

A strong market

Research shows that sales of these 13 global seed companies reached only around 47 million of the world's 500 million smallholder farmers in 2017 (Figure 1).

Investment went mainly to a few countries,

Figure 1: Access to Seeds Index 2019 – Global Seed Companies.



mostly in South and Southeast Asia. In these regions, global companies invest heavily in local seed business activities – twelve of them in breeding and twelve in production. In contrast, such activities are rare in Western and Central Africa, with only two companies investing in local breeding and one in production.

“Although the industry is making advances in developing more nutritious and climate-resilient varieties, it is clear that more needs to be done,” says Ido Verhagen, executive director of the Access to Seeds Index. “Material changes won’t be possible without reaching a greater percentage of smallholder farmers, who account for the lion’s share (80%) of global food production.”

Shaping business models around smallholder farmers’ needs can be profitable, as shown by East-West Seed, a Thailand-based company that tops the index thanks to strong performance across all the assessed areas. It has a unique smallholder-centric approach and a customer base made up almost entirely of smallholders (98%). Switzerland’s Syngenta and Germany’s Bayer, in second and third place respectively, are virtually tied.

Improved seed, reduced hunger

Reaching more smallholder farmers and directing investment to other geographies are critical in tackling rising malnourishment. The number of people suffering from hunger rose from 784 million in 2014 to nearly 821 million in 2017, partly due to lack of access to nutritious food. However, only six of the 13 global seed companies state that nutritional value is a breeding programme priority. Although this is higher than the four companies identified in 2016, progress is slow.

The importance of developing improved varieties of seed, offering better nutritional value and supporting crop diversity is echoed in a recent report by the EAT-Lancet Commission. The global seed industry can do more to address diversification needs by supplying more

crops and varieties, including legumes and local crops, which are currently neglected.

The index also reveals a sharpened focus on climate change. Of the 13 companies evaluated, twelve emphasise that targeting increased yields and improving tolerance to changing climate and the accompanying weather risks are essential when breeding. This has been reflected in increased breeding for climate-resilient field crops and vegetable varieties, since 2016.

By broadening their offering, including the provision of farmer training and other services such as weather-based crop insurance, seed companies have found new ways to help farmers adapt to changing climatic conditions. There are now eight companies integrating sustainability strategies at corporate level, compared to three in 2016.

Sustainable development goals

The Access to Seeds Index 2019 – Global Seed Companies is one of the first benchmarks of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) published by the World Benchmarking Alliance, which was launched in September 2018 during the UN General Assembly in New York. The Access to Seeds Index was established with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Dutch government. The global index is complemented by regional indices that provide in-depth analyses of South and Southeast Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa, and Western and Central Africa.

“The private sector is essential for achieving food and nutrition security, one of the major challenges outlined by the SDGs. With the world’s population rising – and hunger with it – amid growing concerns around the environmental impact of crop production, the role of the global seed industry remains crucial if zero hunger (SDG 2) is to be achieved by 2030,” says Verhagen. 🌱

For more information, visit www.accesstoseeds.org.