



Input Trade Fairs

Giving Farmers a Choice

Input Trade Fairs are rapidly becoming the preferred method of agricultural input distribution in many areas where the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) works. Through this system, vouchers with a cash value are distributed to farmers identified as requiring assistance. These farmers gather at the fairs and 'purchase' agricultural inputs and seeds of their choice, using their own discretion as to which items meet their specific needs. The fairs provide a market for local producers of quality seed, such as beans and groundnuts, which are not always available from commercial suppliers. Input trade fairs support local agricultural retail businesses and encourage them to expand trade in more remote areas, benefiting themselves and farmers.

Beginnings in Kenya

Traditionally, the FAO emergency and rehabilitation division concentrated on providing seed and tools, usually in a pre-packed box, containing one or more field crop seeds, oftentimes tools and in some cases fishing equipment. Fertilizer was usually not included due to its weight and, in many countries, farmers were not familiar with it. Over time, it was recognized that pre-packed inputs did not suit all beneficiaries and a more flexible system of input delivery was needed. Seed Fairs began in Kenya in the late 1990s and responded to the problem of providing disaster-affected farmers with exactly what they wanted in terms of inputs for the following season.

The technique of Input Trade Fairs (or Seed Fairs, as they were originally known) was developed in Kenya by Catholic Relief Services, in collaboration with ICRISAT in the late 1990s. Soon after, fairs were being successfully implemented in Kenya, southern Sudan and even Somalia.

Organization of the Input Trade Fairs

The main objective is to assist the poorest rural populations by supplying basic agricultural inputs.

Farmers are given vouchers of a pre-set financial limit, based on the actual costs of planting a given area of staple crop, while also providing for some vegetable or other crop seed, necessary tools and in some cases machinery hire for land cultivation. The ability of Input Trade Fairs to supply a large array of farm inputs is limited only by the stocks available to vendors and the demand of farmers for particular inputs. Farmers' demand is often criticized for being too narrow, only choosing maize seed, for example, when sorghum and/or millet and a legume would be more suitable for the ecosystem. Farmers are therefore advised on their options by extension agents in terms of suitable inputs to buy.

Success Lies in Variety and Quantity

The key to a successful Input Trade Fair is having a sufficient supply of all the inputs needed on the day of the

fair to match the value of the vouchers given to beneficiaries. The inputs are usually supplied by local traders or local agents of international seed and fertilizer companies, previously informed of the date and location of the fair.

With this method, a higher percentage of external aid money is retained within the impacted area and local produce values increase, thus encouraging further production and trade.

A Social Gathering

The Input Trade Fairs have spin-off benefits. In Mozambique, in particular, they tend to develop into a social event, attracting wide attention and bringing together a great concentration of people in remote areas. Many local farmers go to the fairs even if they are not selected project beneficiaries and some purchase inputs for their own agricultural production using cash.

Other parallel activities are often organized on fair days, taking advantage of the large crowds. These are mainly socio-cultural activities, such as activities that aim to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS. Moreover, some spontaneous cultural activities take place, such as dancing, singing and traditional ceremonies, giving venue for expression of the population's cultural identity.



Over 2 000 Mozambican farmers affected by floods and dry spells have been assisted by FAO through Input Trade Fairs.

(Photo: FAO/J. Koch)

Question and Answers:

Why are Input Trade Fairs needed?

Despite improved harvests during the 2005/2006 season, hundreds of thousands of people all over Southern Africa are still receiving food aid. Many of these food aid beneficiaries could produce food for themselves – if they had the money to buy inputs. But they do not have money now and few have little chance of obtaining it in the near future.

The vast majority of the people of Southern Africa (outside South Africa) derive their income from subsistence agriculture. They have become vulnerable over the past thirty years through a combination of factors, including:

- Many farmers lack purchasing power, related to increasing poverty and the underlying causes of poverty (i.e. shortage of working capital due to lack of property ownership, food and cash crop prices kept low, decline in currency values in the region, massive losses of livestock, which serves as the asset-base for many communities and is also the main source of draught power).
- Markets and input supply systems are not reaching isolated areas, thus farmers have high transaction costs to obtain seed, even if they have money available.
- Commercial seed companies have limited interest in supplying seed for 'food security crops,' such as legumes, pulses, and open pollinated varieties, as there is limited profit in them.

Properly selected and advised beneficiaries of Input Trade Fairs are given a chance to produce their own food and to regain the self-respect that this engenders. Until farmers are able to have their own capital in the form of valuable land, and with it access to credit for working capital, Input Trade Fairs will remain one of the best methods of assisting them to continue farming following natural or man-made disasters.

- James Breen, FAO
Agronomist

Conventional wisdom states that villagers have nothing to sell. People may be poor but they have seed to sell. Let's create the market; let's revitalize the rural economy. Let's create money for the vulnerable population.

- Peter Vantor,
FAO Country Representative in
Mozambique

Why not give farmers cash, rather than a voucher?

- In isolated areas with no markets, even cash cannot buy seed.
- Vendors need a guaranteed market to entice them to remote areas.
- Vouchers can encourage farmers to diversify.

Does diversification of seed types available encourage diversification of diet?

It cannot be assumed that crop diversification will necessarily lead to a more diversified diet for all members of the family. For this reason, FAO finds it imperative to build appropriate nutrition communication as part of the intervention.

How do Input Trade Fairs benefit the community?

All farming communities conform to the bell curve in terms of productivity – some very good, most in the middle, and some very poor at farming. For those who, for whatever reason, lack the basic required inputs to farm, the Input Trade Fair provides the items needed in a cost-effective way and in a local setting, with local traders and the local economy benefiting to the maximum extent.

FAO would like to thank the following donors for currently supporting this activity in Southern Africa:

Canada, ECHO, and the United Kingdom

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