VALIDATION WORKSHOP ON SEEDS REGULATIONS

UNDER THE SEEDS ACT 2013 - 07 MAY 2015

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Members of the planting community

Members of the Press

Distinguished participants

Good Morning.

It is an honour and pleasure for me to be associated with today’s Validation Workshop on Seeds Regulations which have been prepared with the assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.
I would, at the outset, wish to thank the FAO for the assistance provided which has enabled this important project to come to fruition.

These new regulations will allow important sections of the Seeds Act to be proclaimed shortly. As a consequence, the establishment of the regulatory, institutional and technical framework would enable farmers to embark on seed production as a new agribusiness filiere.

Seed is the basic and most vital input for successful crop production. In modern agriculture, high quality seeds and planting materials of improved varieties play a pivotal role in improving productivity, profitability and sustainability of crop production programmes. Improved seeds ensures higher yield, better quality of economic produce and lower cost of production due to inbuilt resistance to major diseases, insect pests and abiotic stresses. High quality seeds are also more eco-friendly, since crops raised from them require less application of pesticides.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Therefore, there is a great need for farmers to use seeds of the highest quality. The primary purpose of the Seed legislation is to safeguard the interests of farmers by protecting them from using poor quality seed. By promoting the use of high quality seed, a seed regulatory system improves the crop yield and hence productivity on farmers’ fields. Farmers can thus maximize their returns on each unit area of land cultivated as the genetic potential of the crop can be fully exploited. The
optimisation of land utilization is also important as access to cultivable land is becoming a major limiting factor to agricultural production in Mauritius. Besides, with the growing population and expanding tourism industry, there is an urgent need to intensify crop production in Mauritius. By setting rules and standards of the market for production, processing, labeling and trade, including import and export of seed, seed legislation also creates a level playing field among seed dealers and producers. This aims at protecting *bona fide* seed dealers and producers from competition by less scrupulous ones.

For several decades, the Ministry has been playing a vital role in the production and supply of seeds of vegetable crops, and planting materials including seedlings, grafts, layers and tissue-cultured plantlets of fruit and ornamental crops at subsidized price to the planting community and public. However, the production of vegetable seeds and other planting materials was mainly centered on traditional varieties presumably because the introduction and development of only a few varieties were successful. The subsidized prices offered by the Ministry for its traditional varieties have been viewed as one factor that could have been a deterrent for the development of a seed industry in Mauritius. The decrease in the seed production capacity of the Ministry over the last few years has therefore opened doors for small growers and entrepreneurs to enter into this line of business. This is, however, a common practice worldwide where seed business
activities are undertaken by private sector with the role of the government being exclusively regulatory. It is, therefore, necessary to encourage production of seeds and planting materials as a viable business activity among individual growers, group of growers and entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, the Ministry should continue to produce seeds of several traditional varieties which are still needed to ensure availability to interested growers. Besides, a strategic seed stock of important vegetable crops such as bean, tomato, crucifers and cucurbits will have to be kept to ensure rapid supply in times of calamities.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

With a view to promoting small scale production of seeds by growers, FAREI introduced the Quality Declared Seeds (QDS) scheme as established by FAO which is an acceptable alternative to the formal seed production system normally managed by private companies and government. The QDS system provides an alternative for seed quality assurance, particularly designed for countries with limited resources, which is less demanding than full seed quality control and certification systems but yet guarantees a satisfactory level of seed quality. Variations in national procedures and standards for variety release, seed certification, and quality control in SADC countries have tended to hinder seed trade between member states discouraging new as well as existing seed entrepreneurs from investing in seed business activities. For instance, some
countries, namely Malawi, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia, are members of the International Seed Testing Association (ISTA) while the rest in the region are not. The levels of skills among seed personnel thus differ from one country to another. This has caused reluctance to accept tests results and hence seeds across countries. Consequently, the region has in general experienced situations when some countries face shortages of seed and others register a surplus. Consequently, it has been proposed to integrate small isolated national seed markets into one large SADC market through the setting up of a SADC Harmonised Seed Regulatory System. The objectives of this system are to:

(a) facilitate the availability of high quality seeds to growers within the SADC region;

(b) make it easier and cheaper for new and existing varieties to gain access to SADC markets;

(c) stimulate the availability of more varieties of seed and encourage more investment in the seed sector;

(d) encourage faster and safer movement of seeds and reduce costs related to seed trade; and

(e) establish a sustainable funding mechanism for supporting the SADC Harmonised Seed Regulatory System.
In order to participate in this system, the Seeds Act 2013 has been harmonized with the SADC Seed Regulatory System. Apart from promoting investment in the seed sector and increasing the number of varieties and availability of high quality seeds to growers, Mauritius will also benefit by participating in the SADC Harmonised Seed Regulatory System. Such a participation will promote capacity building and access to technical know-how, necessary for the enforcement of the forthcoming Seed and Plant Breeders’ Rights legislations. Moreover, by acceding to foreign-bred varieties, the local scientists and growers can largely benefit by building on the value of foreign varieties, and produce new locally adapted varieties which are an improvement on both foreign-bred and existing local varieties. In the end, growers will be offered a wider portfolio of quality seeds at more affordable price thereby enhancing seed and food security.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

The seed industry has, over the years, undergone dynamic changes worldwide and these changes have come with challenges that require institutional reforms in the local seed industry. Regional integration and international trade, together with scientific advances in the area of biotechnology have posed additional challenges that require the local industry to quickly adapt to the changing environment in order to remain competitive both locally and regionally. It is with the underlying aim of addressing these challenges that the National Plant Varieties and Seeds
Office (NPVSO) is being set up. This office will regulate the seed industry mainly the cultivation, production, trade, exportation and importation of seeds of any variety of any kind of plant as well as through the registration of varieties of seeds and seed testing, seed inspection and seed certification.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

The absence of a variety release system has favoured indiscriminate imports and trade of seed by private companies and growers. Several imported varieties which have not been tested are being cultivated by growers. The variety release system represents the most useful tool to evaluate the genetic quality of the seed and aims at identifying the variety, to distinguish between different varieties, to check for genetic purity or to provide a characterization of the variety. The variety characterization is particularly significant for any new variety aimed at being registered in the National Variety List in order to check its distinctness and to provide a description to be used for future needs. The possibility of evaluating a seed lot, identifying the variety to which it belongs, checking its purity, and discriminating between different varieties are crucial points for the seed trade and for seed certification schemes. A well-administered procedure for releasing varieties can also limit many instances of the misappropriation of plant varieties or genetic resources. With a variety release system, a variety must be approved before
entering commercial seed production and only those varieties which are of proven value are available to growers.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

I am confident that the current legislation would provide an enabling environment for the development of a seed industry in Mauritius and eventually for the region. My Ministry would continue to provide the necessary support to address the challenges and to offer a “*service de proximité***” to farmers and agro-entrepreneurs. I would like to conclude by once again thanking the FAO for its collaboration and support for this project.

With these words, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, I now have the pleasure to declare the Workshop open. I wish all the participants fruitful deliberations and plenty of success.

Thank you.