agriculture, land reform & rural development
Department:
Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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MEDIA STATEMENT **Date: 30 January 2025**

CONSERVING CROP DIVERSITY - SOLUTION TO END HUNGER

Millions of farmers in Africa cultivate traditional crop varieties, save seed for the following season and exchange seed with their neighbours and other farmers.

Minister of Agriculture John Steenhuisen explains that farmers manage and conserve crop diversity to safeguard crop production and boost crop yields to meet current and future food demand owing to increasing population growth. “Internationally, farmers were however not formally recognised as custodians of crop diversity, until the adoption of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture which recognises the enormous role played by farmers and indigenous local communities in conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food security and agricultural biodiversity.”

The Department of Agriculture, recently announced that South Africa ratified the International Treaty, making South Africa the 154th Contracting Party to this international agreement.

Minister Steenhuisen says by joining the Treaty, South Africa will have to ensure that national policies and programs fully recognize farmers’ contributions in conservation and sustainable use of traditional crops, particularly neglected and underutilized crops such as millets, cowpea, sorghum, bambara groundnuts to name but a few.
“We need to ensure that indigenous farmers participate in decision making processes related to conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources and in sharing of benefits derived from their use and recognize farmers rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed.”
To achieve this, the Department will among other initiatives, work together with farmers, traditional leaders, civil society organisations and provincial departments of agriculture to support and capacitate existing Community Seed Banks in Limpopo, Eastern Cape and North West provinces.

In the 2025/26 financial year, the Department plans to establish two new Community Seed Banks, one in KwaZulu-Natal and one in Northern Cape province. These Community Seed Banks are hubs for conservation and revitalization of local seed systems focusing on crops suitable for local conditions. Farmers participate in decision making on participatory plant breeding pertaining to their crops and traits of interest, benefit sharing arising from the utilization of these crops and protection

of traditional knowledge. Seed exchange among farmers and communities is promoted through traditional food/seed fairs.

FOOD SECURITY

Crop diversity managed and conserved by the farmers underpins sustainable food systems and is critical in advancing food and nutrition security. Last year the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) released the National Food and Nutrition Security Survey (NFNSS) that indicates about 20 million South Africans are experiencing food insecurity with reasons ranging from high poverty levels, income inequality and unemployment. The impacts of climate change, which is affecting crop yields and increasing the frequency and severity of droughts and floods, and in particular its devastating effects on smallholder and subsistence farming, is highlighted in this report. The NFNSS gives a clear baseline to guide our 2024 to 2029 National Food and Security Plan that is high on our list of priorities, Minister Steenhuisen emphasized.
Conserving crop diversity is a priority at national, regional and international levels. The International Treaty provides an internationally agreed framework for the conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture in genebanks and on-farm. South Africa's National Genebank holds more than 6 000 accessions of mainly traditional varieties of pumpkins (18.5%), common beans (5.3%) cowpea (6.3%), Bambara groundnut (16.2%) maize (15%) and sorghum (5%). This material is not only conserved at the genebank for current and future use, but is also made available to breeders and researchers for development of better varieties, and in some cases the material is repatriated back to farmers for example in cases where their traditional crop varieties have been destroyed by floods or other natural disasters. Recently, the National Genebank working with eThekwini Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, repatriated 113 accessions of maize, groundnuts, cowpea, bambara and sesame to communities affected by floods.

Recognising that countries are interdependent on genetic resources for food and agriculture and depend on crops that originated from other countries for food security and crop improvement, joining the International Treaty will also ensure that South Africa participates in the Treaty's Multilateral System which facilitates access to a global pool of genetic resources intended to be utilized for the purposes of training, breeding and research for food and agriculture. South Africa may also benefit from the Treaty's Benefit-Sharing Fund that disburses funds in support of crop diversity conservation and capacity building worldwide.

The effective national implementation of this International Treaty for the benefit of South Africa's farmers and citizens will require government support at all levels and collaboration between civil society organisations, public and private sectors.

More information on the Treaty can be accessed on the following website/s:

- https://www.fao.org/plant-treaty/en/

For more information on SA membership to ITPGRFA , please contact:

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