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Harmonised Seed Security Project (HASSP) concept note

With only six more years to go, achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 1 target, of halving poverty and hunger by 2015, remains a pipe dream for most developing countries, especially those in Africa. In southern Africa, the biggest challenges remain widespread food insecurity and chronic hunger and malnutrition. More specifically, in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where 200 million people live, 19% to 48% of under-five children are chronically under-nourished, with some countries chronically dependent on food aid. Such high malnutrition levels have long term adverse effects on the countries' development agendas given their impact on intellectual and physical ability and productivity of the affected generations. In Malawi, a country with the highest prevalence of chronic undernutrition (stunting) in Africa, the World Bank estimates that undernutrition robs the country of economic growth potential equivalent to 2 percentage points every year, much of which is lost in agriculture, the main contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Malnutrition also remains the leading cause of child mortality of 118 per 1000 and also counts for 11% of the country's disease burden.

Due to the stagnated agricultural productivity, Africa currently spends USD33 billion on food imports annually, with USD9.8 billion being spent in Southern Africa. World over, political will to allocate greater resources to agriculture and rural development is growing at national and international levels. International financing institutions and donors, including the European Commission (EC), are giving renewed attention to agriculture and rural people by increasing funding of investments in agriculture, rural development and sustainable management of natural resources.

Investments in Agriculture, however, must be prioritized if impact on food security and incomes is to be maximized. A critical area of investment with high potential for quick impact for SADC has been identified, and this is getting the already available improved technology (hardware and software) off-the shelf to smallholder farmers who are the primary producers of staple food in most countries. Both the improved germ-plasm (seed and farm animal breeds) and new superior farming techniques (e.g., conservation farming) must be rolled out to the farmers as a matter of urgency. However, there are three major impediments, resulting in persistent food shortages and over-reliance on donations of often poor quality relief seed and food aid. First, not all countries in the region are well endowed with improved technology; with many having weak seed production systems. Second, historical intra-regional disparities in policy and regulatory frameworks between the 15 SADC member states continue to impede trade in seed and other technologies. Third, most countries have weak input distribution systems, resulting in limited access to improved seed and other critical farming inputs by farmers.

In response to these challenges, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), guided by its development philosophy stated in the "Message South" successfully funded Phase I of the SADC Seed Security Network Project (SSSN 1) (2006-2008), whose aim was to contribute to policy dialogue and formulation, culminating in elimination of trade barriers that are hindering intra-regional trade in seed products. SSSN 1 culminated in the approval of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) by SADC Ministers responsible for Agriculture and Food Security to adopt a SADC Harmonized Seed Regulatory System. The protocol has high potential to improve the flow of improved seed between countries, thus increasing access by men and women farmers to higher yielding technology. If implemented, the protocol will strengthen: (i) the variety release system to promote sharing of improved crop varieties

across countries, (ii) strengthen the seed certification and quality assurance system in order to speed up the release of commercial seed onto the market, and (iii) strengthen the phytosanitary measures system to standardize them and facilitate cross-border movement of safe seed within the region.

Given this potential, and building on this success from SSSN 1, SDC plans to fund in Phase 2, the Harmonized Seed Security Project (HASSP) with the overall objective of improving food security of smallholder farmers in the SADC region by increasing their access to seeds. The purpose of the project is to provide enabling support to SADC member states to domesticate the regional seed protocol, harmonise their seed policies and legislation, and effectively implement the provisions of the protocol with enhanced national capacities. The ultimate beneficiaries of the project are smallholder farming households whose access to better yields of staple and other preferred crops are expected to increase.

HASSP is conceived as a pilot project that is designed to gain entry into an initial four countries (Malawi, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe) that have been assessed and found, among other criteria, to be most ready for quick take-off. HASSP will finance the following main activities: (i) the process of reviewing national policy and legislation on seed; (ii) capacity strengthening of key institutions and individuals involved in critical stages of the seed value chain, including upgrading of laboratory facilities for seed testing and phytosanitary control; (iii) policy research and advocacy around seed issues; (iii) establishment of national and regional databases and other activities for information and knowledge dissemination on new seed policies and regulations, and new varieties released and commercialized.

For HASSP, SDC has chosen to partner with the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network, a legally constituted private voluntary organisation (PVO) registered in Zimbabwe in 2003 that is capable of reaching out to the large diversity of stakeholders expected for the project. FANRPAN was conceived in 1994 in response to a call by SADC Ministers of Agriculture and Food Security for an autonomous institution that would champion policy research to generate evidence to inform policy makers, create platforms for policy dialogue and voice, and build capacity of member states in policy formulation. FANRPAN activities are coordinated by its Regional Secretariat based in Pretoria, and by country nodes comprising members from government, the private sector, research/academic institutions and farmer bodies. A due diligence exercise commissioned by SDC found no material defects in FANRPAN's governance and financial management systems, and that other donors funding FANRPAN (including USAID and CTA) have confidence in the integrity of the partner's systems and reporting standards. The organisation has a solid and respected Constitution, a new Strategic Plan (2007-2015), a strong 8 member multi-skilled and high profile Board that is transparent (donors can sit on the board), active and effective in decision-making. The main weaknesses raised by the due diligence concern the gaps in staffing, these originate from the limited core-funding, which is typical of growing donor-dependent institutions, but a constraint that HASSP will partly resolve by providing resources for direct recruitment of 7 new staff for the new project and by contributing to FANRPAN's core budget through an overhead provision in the HASSP budget. Through the partner, SDC will link into, and complement on-going COMESA-funded activities on the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) that are being implemented by FANRPAN under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

By the end of HASSP in April 2013, at least four countries in SADC would have successfully domesticated and operationalised the harmonised seed systems. Trade bottlenecks affecting movement of seeds across borders in the region will have been reduced and accessibility (availability and affordability) of higher quality seeds to poor women and men smallholder farmers will have increased in these four pilot countries. Staple food yields and household farm incomes will have started improving.