



Newsletter

Issue 15, March 2026

About this newsletter

The purpose of the ESP newsletter is to provide relevant information on the latest developments and current issues in the Ethiopian seed sector and the partnership support activities.

In this issue we highlight the major activities that have taken place between Jan - Mar 2026.

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Seeds for resilience in fragile context: A new chapter for community-based seed production in Afar Region

In Ethiopia's Afar Region, farmers long reliant on humanitarian seed aid due to droughts and floods are now seeing change. Efforts are underway to transform the seed system, offering hope to these resilient agro-pastoral communities.

The region has long faced seed insecurity, relying on external seed assistance due to the lack of local producers except for the small Afar Seed Enterprise. These imported seeds from other regions were often late,

costly, or unsuitable for local conditions, undermining the productivity and resilience of Afar's farmers.

What's more, the prevailing practice of direct seed distribution by humanitarian organizations unintentionally stifled the growth of local seed production systems. Instead of fostering independence, it deepened reliance on external aid. But change was on the horizon.

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Seeds for resilience in fragile context: A new chapter...

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Seed producers cooperatives officially established

Mercy Corps Ethiopia, through its ESP Seed Insecurity Response program, collaborated with regional partners to empower communities to produce quality seeds, reduce aid dependency, and boost agricultural resilience. This effort led to the establishment of Afar's first licensed Seed Producer Cooperatives: Qayawisa SPC in Afambo and Sadiseno SPC in Amibara *woredas*, offering new hope to local farmers after years of challenges. Formal SPCs started local seed production and supplies

The journey to formalize these SPCs was no small feat. It required collaboration with the regional Cooperative Promotion Agency, meticulous planning, and unwavering commitment from all actors. Once registered and launched, the cooperatives hit the ground running.

Armed with technical knowledge, ongoing support, and 19 quintals of Early Generation Seed (EGS), the SPCs began cultivating teff and maize across 57 hectares of land. The results have been nothing short of remarkable. This season alone, they expect to produce over 2,000 quintals of certified seeds: enough to supply quality seeds to an estimated 8,000 farmers across the region.

One hundred farmers; 36 of them women; are now directly involved in these intermediary seed production practices.

Seed quality assurance

To ensure the seeds meet quality standards, the newly established Regional Seed Regulatory Directorate under BoANR conducted two rounds of field inspections. The results were promising: all 57 hectares of seed fields passed minimum inspection standards, with maize fields showing exceptional performance.

The next steps include postharvest inspections and laboratory analyses to finalize certification and issue official seed tags.

standing in this field, we see proof that Afar can produce its own quality seed when the right support is in place."

For Mr. Mohammed Ali, Chairperson of Qayawisa SPC, the transformation has been deeply personal: *"We never expected to see such results from our own farmland. Now we have learned how to produce quality seed, and next season we plan to produce even more so our community can benefit."*



Market linkages

Beyond production, building market linkages has been a key focus. Field day events have brought together farmers, humanitarian organizations, and development actors to witness the progress firsthand.

One participant from Save the Children shared their excitement: *"There were times when we travelled long distances searching for seeds for farmers in need. Today,*

Then what- The Next Steps?

While the achievements so far are remarkable, there's still much work to be done. The next chapter involves further strengthening the technical, organizational, and institutional capacities of these SPCs. Building stronger linkages to markets and services will be crucial for sustaining this momentum and scaling up impact across the region.



Seed self-certification pilot to advance seed quality

Ethiopia's seed sector is transforming with the introduction of Seed Self-Certification under a new seed proclamation. While implementation poses challenges, the Ethiopian Seed Partnership (ESP) is facilitating progress by piloting the system, led by Ethiopian Agricultural Authority, to enhance efficiency and accountability. A recent workshop brought stakeholders together to refine the framework, review a draft code of conduct, and gather input for successful execution.

What is seed self-certification?

Seed self-certification represents a significant departure from the traditional, regulator-driven model of seed certification. Under this new approach, qualified seed companies will take on the responsibility of assuring the quality of their own seeds, operating under stringent regulatory oversight. The model is built on principles of trust, accountability, and robust internal quality control, with the goal of reducing bottlenecks in the certification process while promoting company-level responsibility for seed quality.

The workshop

A workshop with 31 participants, including regulatory bodies, seed companies, and development partners, discussed introducing seed self-certification in Ethiopia. Key presentations covered a draft directive and a Code of Conduct outlining roles

and compliance. Stakeholders agreed the initiative is timely to meet growing seed demand, boost quality control, and strengthen institutional capacity. The pilot will start with a small group of trusted companies meeting specific criteria like qualified staff, infrastructure, and labs, allowing careful monitoring before scaling up.

Key considerations for implementation

While enthusiasm for the pilot is high, stakeholders recognized several technical and logistical challenges that must be addressed to ensure success. Among these are:

Regulatory oversight:

Maintaining rigorous oversight such as regular auditing to prevent conflicts of interest and ensure compliance with quality standards.

Certification labelling:

Establishing clear guidelines for labelling certified seeds to build farmer trust.

Infrastructure and capacity building:

Addressing gaps in laboratory equipment, staff expertise, and organizational systems.

Separation of functions:

Ensuring a clear division between production and quality control within participating companies.

Farmer awareness: Educating farmers about the seed self-certification system to build market confidence.

Approval of the directive: - EAA in collaboration with MoA need to get approval of the directive for self and third-party seed certification.

The workshop also stressed the importance of regular calibration

of laboratory equipment, periodic external audits, and close coordination among stakeholders to mitigate challenges.

Proposed pilot scope

The pilot program will focus on key crops where Ethiopia has strong potential: bread wheat, maize, and vegetable seedlings like tomato, pepper, and cabbage. The pilot will be conducted in Amhara, Oromia and Central Ethiopia regions. This phased approach will allow regulators and stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of the program before expanding it nationwide.

Next steps

The workshop outlined key actions, including finalizing the directive, tailoring regional guidelines, assessing readiness, and piloting this year. Priorities include training stakeholders, ensuring company separation, and raising farmer awareness.

When become practical, Seed self-certification is widely regarded as a groundbreaking reform that has the potential to transform Ethiopia's seed sector. By reducing regulatory burdens while enhancing accountability and efficiency, this initiative could pave the way for a more competitive and resilient agricultural system. With meticulous planning and robust oversight mechanisms in place, Ethiopia is poised to set an example for other nations seeking to modernize their agricultural industries.

Training of Trainers to strengthen Alage ATVET Business Incubation Center

To strengthen the capacity of Alage Agricultural TVET College Business Incubation Center (BIC), a four-day Training of Trainers (ToT) program was recently conducted for the academic staff and management of the college alongside representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Skills (MoLS). This ToT aimed to equip participants with the required technical skills and knowledge to effectively deliver training and manage the Business Incubation Centre (BIC) of the college.

Participants and training structure

The training brought together nine participants, including selected academic staff and management from Alage Agricultural TVET College, as well as two representatives from MoLS. The program adopted an interactive and practice-oriented modality, ensuring participants could replicate the training processes in real-world scenarios.

The training was structured into two main components:

two days of classroom-based sessions followed by two days of field visits. This balanced approach allowed participants to gain theoretical insights while also engaging in practical experience-sharing activities with established companies. To further enhance learning outcomes, the program was supported by systematically organized training materials.

The training covered a range of topics designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of business incubation and entrepreneurship. The main topics included:

Business Incubation Centers:

Explored their role in developing ideas into viable enterprises.

Incubation cycle: Covered stages like recruitment, coaching, evaluation, and follow-up support.

Business coaching: Highlighted coaching competencies and effective communication techniques.

Business model canvas: Focused on designing models with clear value propositions and customer strategies.

Access to finance: Provided insights into financial management and resource optimization.

Experience sharing and field visits

Participants visited three organizations for practical learning as part of their training, starting at the Ethiopian Association for Startup Ecosystem (EASE), which supports Ethiopia's innovation and startup growth.

Then General Wingate TVET College: Here, Participants observed firsthand the operations of a well-established BIC, gaining valuable insights into its challenges and strategies for resilience.

Next, the group explored greenhouse and seedling production processes, witnessing how agricultural knowledge can be transformed into practical, profitable enterprises.

The visit concluded at HortiLife PLC, a hub of innovation in greenhouse operations. Here, participants gained insights into pre-production, production, and post-production processes. They learned about input management, temperature control, and best practices for handling delicate crops.

The ToT program was successful and it is expected that it equipped participants with the tools to manage a thriving BIC and foster entrepreneurial innovation.



Restoring seed systems: A pathway to recovery and resilience in Tigray

The conflict in Tigray has severely disrupted agriculture, leaving farming communities struggling. Local seed systems, vital for food production and farmer resilience, have been heavily impacted. Key structures like Seed Producer Cooperatives (SPCs) and Community Seed Banks (CSBs) face damaged infrastructure, hindering their ability to produce, store, and distribute quality seeds.

To address this pressing issue, Mercy Corps' ESP Seed Insecurity Response (SIR) program aimed to help conflict-affected seed actors in Tigray regain functionality, restore farming households' access to quality seeds, and promote long-term recovery. Initial assessments across four woredas, conducted with SPCs and CSBs, highlighted strong technical expertise but a lack of essential infrastructure like storage, tools, and furniture, hindering operations.

Guided by these findings, Mercy Corps ESP SIR program supported eight SPCs and two CSBs across three woredas with over 3.2 million ETB in strategic investments. Delivered items included seed weighing scales, materials for storage facility repairs, office furniture, and seed moisture testers. Efforts focused on sustainable seed production and distribution without disrupting local markets.

Immediate results with long-term implications

The impact of this initiative has been both immediate and transformative. Restored

storage and processing facilities have allowed seed producer groups to resume vital activities such as proper seed storage, weighing, record-keeping, and documentation. These improvements are essential for maintaining seed quality and ensuring that farmers receive reliable, locally adapted seeds when needed for planting.

Beyond physical infrastructure restoration, the intervention has fostered a profound human impact. For many members of SPCs and CSBs, particularly women, who play a critical role in community seed systems; this rehabilitation effort symbolizes dignity, hope, and renewed purpose.

Tsedal Girmay, a member of Atseyohannes SPC in Degua Timben, shared her heartfelt perspective: *"When I saw all these new materials supporting our store, I did not just see materials. I saw our future harvests protected. I felt happy not just for me but for all the mothers and farmers who use our seeds to farm and feed their families."*

Similarly, Priest G/Igzehabher Hadgu, Head of Ayba Community Seed Bank in Emba Alaje, expressed gratitude: *"From nothing, the program has equipped us with the necessary seed service facilities. We thank Mercy Corps for the support!"*

Haftom Takur, leader of Birhan Ayba SPC in Emba Alaje, emphasized the empowering nature of the intervention: *"This is not a handout; it is a hand up. With these tools, we are regaining our role as guardians of our land's future. We are now motivated to produce quality seeds because we know our community's resilience grows from what we plant today."*

These testimonials highlight how

strategic, need-based assistance can rebuild confidence, restore institutional capacity, and strengthen community-based seed systems.

Strengthening local seed markets and building resilience

In addition to infrastructure rehabilitation, this intervention addresses systemic challenges within the local seed market by revitalizing a critical link in the agricultural value chain. By restoring the operational capacity of SPCs and CSBs, Mercy Corps has empowered community-based seed producers to resume their functions effectively.

With their operations back on track, these cooperatives are now better positioned to supply high-quality seeds, stimulate local economic activity, and reduce dependency on external seed assistance. Strengthening local seed systems in this manner fosters community self-reliance and enhances the ability of farming households to withstand future shocks—whether climatic, economic, or conflict-related.

Looking ahead

Mercy Corps will continue its commitment to support these community institutions as they maintain their recovery journey. Through ongoing efforts to restore capacity, increase productivity, enhance market engagement, and secure long-term seed availability for farming communities, the ESP SIR program aims to ensure sustainable seed insecurity response.



Strengthening international seed partnerships through AFSTA 2026 annual congress

The Ethiopian Seed Association (ESA), in partnership with the Ethiopian Seed Partnership (ESP), led a delegation to the African Seed Trade Association (AFSTA) 2026 Annual Congress, held from March 23–25, 2026 in Cape Town, South Africa. Under the theme “Empowering Africa’s Future, One Seed at a Time,” the congress brought together key stakeholders from the seed industry across the continent and beyond to discuss strategies for advancing agricultural productivity and food security in Africa.

The Ethiopian delegation, which included representatives from two public seed enterprises, two domestic private companies, ESA, and ESP, had a dual mission at the congress. First, they aimed to build critical linkages between Ethiopian seed producers and international breeding companies to foster access to improved crop varieties. Second, the delegation sought to lobby the AFSTA Board to secure Ethiopia as the host nation for the AFSTA 2028 Congress.

Strategic partnerships for improved crop varieties

One of the significant achievements of the Ethiopian delegation was the establishment of business connections with major international seed companies. The team engaged in fruitful discussions with three prominent African seed companies, all of which expressed willingness to collaborate with Ethiopian enterprises. The talks centred on facilitating access to improved crop varieties already registered under the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) framework, thereby streamlining the registration process in Ethiopia.

As part of the agreement, the international companies will send their varieties to Ethiopia for testing across various agro-ecological zones. This approach will enable Ethiopian seed producers to identify and adopt varieties best suited to their unique environmental

conditions. In addition, the four companies had private discussions with many other companies, trying to establish business linkage. The partnerships are anticipated to significantly boost the adoption of COMESA-registered varieties in Ethiopia, paving the way for enhanced agricultural productivity and food security in the country.

Ethiopia’s bid to host AFSTA 2028 Congress

In addition to fostering business collaborations, the Ethiopian delegation actively lobbied for Addis Ababa to host the AFSTA 2028 Congress. During the congress, the team presented a compelling case, emphasizing Ethiopia’s strategic advantages and capacity to host such a high-profile event. They highlighted the country’s robust seed sector, which includes over 350 active seed companies, as well as its extensive experience

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Hands-on training to strengthen private seed companies seed quality analysis capacity

In an effort to enhance food security, improve nutrition, and bolster climate resilience, the role of high-quality seeds cannot be overstated. Recognizing this, the Ethiopian Seed Partnership (ESP) has been working diligently with domestic seed companies to strengthen their capacity in seed production and quality assurance. By equipping these companies with the tools and knowledge required to deliver quality seeds of improved crop varieties, ESP is paving the way for a more sustainable and productive agricultural sector in Ethiopia.

Identifying challenges and addressing gaps in seed quality control

The ESP assessment identified gaps in seed quality testing among private seed companies, citing limited technical skills and unfamiliarity with Directive No. 1097/2025, which requires an Internal Seed Quality Control System. In response, a practical training program was held in Bishoftu on March 24-25, 2026, to enhance agronomists' skills in seed sampling, germination, purity, and moisture testing. The program included hands-on sessions and a visit to ATM Seed Company's storage facility to observe best practices. Eighteen participants, including an Ethiopian Agricultural Authority representative, attended.

Outcomes of the training and participants' feedback

The training program was successful in building the capacity of the trainees. Agronomists reported enhanced technical competence and greater confidence in conducting

laboratory-based seed quality tests. Many also noted that the training improved their decision-making abilities related to seed processing, storage, and marketing.

A particularly valuable aspect of the program was the emphasis on peer learning. Agronomists from different companies shared experiences, challenges, and best practices,



fostering a spirit of collaboration that is crucial for advancing Ethiopia's seed industry. Participants expressed strong appreciation for the practical



orientation of the training. The hands-on sessions were especially well-received, as they clarified complex procedures and provided actionable insights. Many attendees emphasized that the training would significantly

enhance the accuracy and reliability of their seed quality assessments in day-to-day operations.

The success of this training underscores the importance of practical, short-term learning initiatives in building capacity within Ethiopia's private seed sector. By

equipping agronomists with the skills required for accurate seed quality analysis, ESP is contributing to the production and distribution of high-

quality seeds. This, in turn, supports increased agricultural productivity, strengthens farmer confidence in improved crop varieties, and promotes sustainable development.



Strengthening international seed partnerships through AFSTA 2026 ...

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in hosting major international conferences such as African Union summits and other global events.

The delegation also underscored Ethiopia's logistical strengths, including the world-class services of Ethiopian Airlines and an array of international-standard hotels capable of accommodating global participants. Furthermore, they pointed out that despite Ethiopia's longstanding membership in AFSTA; which includes consistent payment of membership fees and

participation on the association's board; the country has yet to host an AFSTA Congress. In contrast, some member nations have hosted multiple times.

The AFSTA Board responded positively to Ethiopia's bid, acknowledging the country's potential as a host nation. They encouraged the ESA to submit a formal proposal outlining detailed plans for hosting the event. The board also committed to establishing clear criteria for evaluating bids and ensuring a

fair decision-making process. A promising path forward To summarize, the Ethiopian delegation at the AFSTA 2026 Congress secured notable achievements that contribute for a step forward for Ethiopia's seed sector. The newly formed partnerships with international seed companies are expected to accelerate access to high-quality crop varieties, while Ethiopia's bid to host the AFSTA 2028 Congress underscores its growing prominence in Africa's seed sector.



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