

Endorsement Speech ISSD Africa, September 18 2014, Nairobi

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Why had the Aboriginals hardly left Australia when the Brits crossed half of the world to land their ships on Australian shores?

Why were the Khalkha' of Southern Africa still practising extensive pastoral agriculture when the Dutch had established the Dutch East India Company?

Why was all of this not the other way around?

In his bestselling book— Guns, Germs and Steel - Jared Diamond tries to answer this loaded question.

Being an anthropologist, who spent many years in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea he knew this had nothing to do with intellect.

In his book he describes how the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea are at least equally smart as those he went to school with...

...and probably a lot wiser, he adds.

After debunking other popular but false beliefs about what caused these differences in development, Mr. Diamond comes up with a more plausible and scientific explanation.

This explanation revolves around the title of his book: guns, germs and steel

...but ultimately starts with seeds.

For a complex society to develop - one where people can specialize, rather than spend their entire life as hunters and gatherers — agriculture is essential.

Mr. Diamond argues that the availability of staple crops is the precondition for the emergence of agriculture.

Now it turns out that staple crops don't magically appear out of nowhere.

It took generations to develop grasses into something that vaguely resembles something we now know as grain.

But apart from the effort needed, suitable plant species are not abundant. In fact they are very rare.

When agriculture first emerged - about 13,000 years ago - there were only a few dozen naturally occurring plants around that could be turned into a reliable staple crop.

To make matters worse, they were also very unequally divided over the planet.

Some areas were blessed with a wide range of suitable varieties where other had very few, or none at all.

Mr. Diamond demonstrates that the presence of naturally occurring varieties with favourable characteristics correlates perfectly with the emergence of agriculture.

Or more notably, the fact that agriculture in so many places never emerged by itself.

In Australia, North America and Sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture capable of feeding complex societies only developed after people - many thousands of years later - brought in seeds from different parts of the world.

China and the river delta of the Tigris and Euphrates on the other hand were rich in suitable plants like the ancestors of barley, wheat and pulses.

Once developed into crops that were suitable for storage, their seeds quickly spread throughout Eurasia.

This allowed for the emergence of complex societies in Eurasia many thousands of years before most of the world had even seen the beginning of agriculture.

Given this head start, these societies developed into nations with armies and seafaring fleets used to colonize others.

The rest is history.

The point of this story is to remind us that the ability to improve, save and exchange seeds has deeply shaped humanity from the very beginning.

Although seeds have crossed many oceans and climate zones since, the quality and availability of seeds - or the lack of it - still shapes agriculture,

For better or worse.

Today, plant breeding is no longer the sole domain of farming communities — like *everything* else the domain of specialization.

Companies, universities and governments have revolutionized the world of plant breeding.

This inspired the emergence of public sector seed programs in the 1970's and 80's in most sub-Saharan African countries, targeting the dissemination of quality seed of improved varieties.

The orientation in 1990s shifted toward withdrawal of the public sector, promoting privatization and liberalization of the seed market.

These policies have in common that they underestimated the value of informal seeds systems which still produce the bulk of seed in Sub-Sahara Africa...

...and despite their intentions largely failed to let farmers benefit from important advances in public and private sector breeding.

If there is one lesson to be drawn from the different policy interventions since the 1970, it must be that we should never bet on a single horse.

Instead, we need policies that embrace the diversity as it exists in reality.

Integrated seed sector development embraces this diversity by better linking informal and formal seed systems, and balancing public and private sector involvement.

It explores variation among seed value chains, with the aim of making seed programs and policies more coherent with farmers' practices and entrepreneurs' wishes.

By taking both groups well into account seed programs and policies can become more effective at reaching agricultural development and food security.

Modern-day plant breeding, given all these actors and interest involved, cannot do without smart and robust governance systems.

Or more precise – in the words of the ISSD Africa consortium; *we need governance structures that allow for the development of a market-oriented, pluralistic, vibrant and dynamic seed sector.*

This focus on the governance of seed sectors and the interaction between formal and informal seed systems makes ISSD Africa stand out.

But this also makes it — like all aspects of agriculture have always been — deeply political

ISSD Africa can therefore not succeed without African governments participating, for it needs legitimacy and support.

This is why the Dutch Government values the support and leadership by national Governments and the African Union so highly.

We hope the coalition will continue to grow; in this respect — our host country - Kenya is an excellent hub to make this happen.

In fact, while we are on the subject - why could Kenya not be the first new country to join this coalition as we enter this new phase?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope to have marked why the Dutch government considers ISSD Africa to be such an important programme, one we gladly continue to support to make it a success.

But before I close off - I'd like to emphasize that our investments in ISSD Africa are no isolated action.

ISSD Africa fits within our wider intentions and commitments towards improving seed systems throughout the world and especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Two initiatives supported by the Dutch Government in this regard stand out.

One is SEVIA — a public private partnerships in East-Africa where Dutch breeding companies engage with farmers and supply chain actors to make plant breeding an integrated part of value chain development.

This project highlights the important role for plant breeding in allowing, in this case vegetable farmers, to seize the opportunities Africa's emerging markets have to offer.

The other initiative is The Access to Seeds Index. This index aims to further engage leading seed companies in agricultural development and combating food security.

Leading seed companies with their expertise and capacity to scale have a lot to offer for farmers in developing countries.

By ranking these companies according to their commitments and performance we create a benchmark system that allows us to credit companies for what they do and stimulate them to make the extra effort.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been a close partner in many of these efforts.

I'd like to make use of this opportunity to stress that we value this partnership very highly and hope that we can continue to build upon it.

Let me close off by imagining that Mr. Diamond as the author of Guns, Germs and Steel would be sitting in the audience.

As he would listen to us talking about seeds and governance, he would probably point out the irony in this;

That is - if it wasn't for seeds, there wouldn't be any governance in the first place - let alone people having time discussing it without having to worry about lunch being served!

Seeing it from this perspective it's both a luxury and necessity that we are able to talk like this about seeds governance.

Let's make sure we spend this time together in the best possible way we can, for it needs to benefit farmers who depend on quality seeds and improved varieties.

Thank you.