Better seed still needs a viable business

Agriculture, food quality & nutrition

Retrospective · 2021 production cycles, reviewed in September 2022 | Published 17 November 2026

Retrospective learning edition: the period above is the experience discussed, not an earlier publication date.

A crop can have nutritional promise while its production model remains difficult. The iron-rich bean experience in Karamoja helps separate a development objective from a viable seed business.

IAM’s iron-rich bean seed-production test

FtF IAM tested local production of iron-rich bean Quality Declared Seed in Karamoja through producer groups and commercial farmers. The intervention brief describes production support and connections with research and market actors, alongside adaptation between two 2021 seasons.

Reported yields increased from 37 to 115 kilograms per acre between the cycles, remaining below the anticipated 375 kilograms per acre. The brief identifies weather, labour, group capability, seed performance and market-entry difficulties. Improvement between cycles did not establish commercial viability.

What the Activity did

1. Partnered with groups and commercial farmers to test local seed production.

2. Supported technical links and access to seed-production knowledge and inputs.

3. Reviewed production experience and adapted the approach between cycles.

Evidence boundary

This is an intervention learning account. The yield comparison is not a controlled impact estimate and does not establish nutritional outcomes or a sustainable seed market.

What this means for future design

UMSDN editorial interpretation

UMSDN's interpretation is to test two propositions separately. Can the crop perform under the production conditions? Can a producer earn enough to cover seed, labour, supervision, quality assurance and marketing? A positive answer to one does not guarantee the other.

A future design could start with a small agronomic and commercial test before financing expansion. Record who provides labour, whether its cost is counted, the buyer's requirements and the consequences of a failed season. Treat a projected selling price as an assumption until there is credible demand at that price.

Group production adds its own questions. Who makes decisions, contributes work, keeps records and receives payment? A group can be cohesive for a social purpose without being ready to manage a commercial crop. Diagnosis should examine the actual arrangement rather than treating group membership as evidence of business capability.

Adaptation needs a decision rule. State what the next cycle is intended to resolve, which evidence will trigger a change, and when continued investment would no longer be justified. Retain the original targets and explain revisions so that learning remains visible. A difficult pilot can be useful when it prevents a larger, poorly grounded commitment.

The question for discussion

What minimum evidence would you require before expanding an iron-rich bean seed-production model?

Try this with your team

Prepare a one-acre downside case without inventing field results. List the cost items, possible production risks, intended buyer and who absorbs a loss. Mark every unverified assumption and choose the first two to test.

Read the source. Share your view.

Iron-rich beans intervention learning brief

FtF IAM, September 2022. Quantities are reported production figures, not independent impact estimates.

https://beamexchange.org/resources/resource-library/2104/

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