Seeds of Resistance: Nigerian Farmers and the Fight for Sovereignty

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Abstract

This paper explores how the 2019 National Agricultural Seeds Council (NASC) Act in Nigeria has altered traditional seed sovereignty, elevating commercial interests and marginalizing longstanding local practices. Drawing on scholarly sources, interviews, and personal narrative, it examines how Nigerian farmers resist these shifts through both organized protest and cultural resilience. The essay reflects on historical and diasporic seed practices, arguing that seed governance is not only a matter of policy but of memory, identity, and survival. Seeds are more than inputs; they are symbols of continuity and resistance. This case study of Nigeria serves as a lens to understand wider tensions across Africa and the global South around intellectual property, development, and indigenous knowledge systems

Keywords: seed sovereignty, NASC Act, Nigerian agriculture, indigenous knowledge, food justice

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The early morning air still holds a chill as Mariam Usman kneels in the dry soil of her farm in Katsina State. Her weathered hands move with peaceful precision, creating surface holes in the dirt where she places millet seeds passed down through generations. These seeds, held in a calabash tucked away in her family's hut, carry more than just genetic code; they carry memory, drought hardened resilience, and the quiet whispers of women who planted before her."Before I plant, I speak to them," Mariam says, sitting beneath the root of a tree. "I tell them tales of my grandmother, how she survived the drought of the 1970s with these same seeds. That's how they know to be strong." Her face tightens. "Now they say what I'm doing is illegal. Since when is talking to your ancestors against the law? “That intimate bond between people and their seeds a bond shaped by generations of trial, transformation, and spiritual care is now at the soul of a national debate. In 2019, Nigeria passed the National Agricultural Seeds Council (NASC) Act.

While given as a step toward agricultural reform and food security, the law has caused deep anxiety among smallholder farmers and civil society groups who see it as a tool for banning traditional seed systems in favor of corporate-controlled, commercial agriculture (Environmental Rights Action, 2020).This essay argues that Nigeria's NASC Act represents a fundamental clash between divergent knowledge systems one prioritizing standardization, commercialization, and global integration, and another valuing cultural continuity, local adaptation, and community sovereignty. Through analysis of both secondary research and personal experience growing up in Nigeria, I demonstrate how this clash has sparked diverse forms of resistance that are not merely economic or political, but profoundly cultural and spiritual in nature. At stake is not simply agricultural policy, but the question of who controls knowledge, memory, and the future of food in Africa's most populous nation.

Planting in the Past: The Historical Context of Nigerian Seed Systems

To comprehend the backlash to the NASC Act, we must understand what it disrupted. Long before colonization and formal laws, Nigerian farmers had developed deeply rooted systems of seed saving and sharing. Hausa communities in the north practiced gandu, a form of collective farming that included careful seed selection. In the south, yam and cowpea varieties were exchanged at festivals, gifted at weddings, and preserved as family legacies (Falola, 2018).Colonial farming prioritized export crops and sidelined local food traditions. After independence, Nigeria's agricultural direction leaned heavily on imported varieties, especially during the oil boom and later under structural adjustment programs.

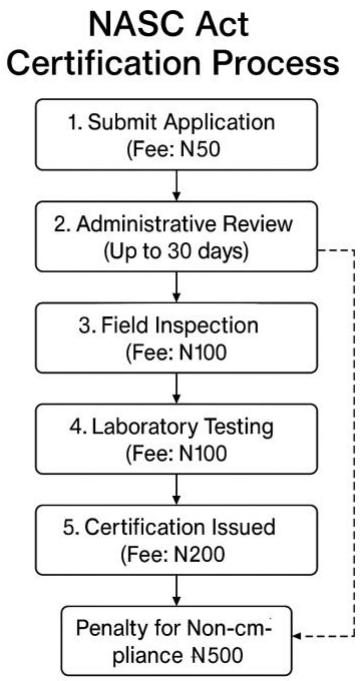
These policies favored large-scale farming and undermined the everyday systems that had long fed the country (Scott, 2017).But these informal systems never vanished. In fact, they evolved a lifeline. As a child in Lagos, I watched my grandmother carefully select seeds from previous crops, storing them in cloth wrapped jars with specific details about which would grow best in our sandy soil. This wasn't mere memories it was a practical system of agricultural knowledge transmission that operates independently of formal institutions. Today, farmer-to-farmer exchanges still provide most of the seeds used across Nigeria. They're efficient, adaptive, and community-based (Coomes et al., 2015)—and yet, with one law, they were pushed into a legal gray area.

The Law That Changed the Soil: Unpacking the NASC Act[1]

The NASC Act came into effect in June 2019 following years of pressure from international donors and agribusiness interests. The law restructures Nigeria's seed governance system in several critical ways:

- It establishes a centralized National Agricultural Seeds Council with sweeping regulatory powers
- It requires all seeds sold or exchanged commercially to be certified by registered producers
- It imposes penalties of up to two years imprisonment or fines of 1 million naira (approximately $2,400 USD) for distributing uncertified seeds

It creates a seed certification process that requires laboratory testing, documentation, and registration fees beyond the reach of most smallholders



It makes no provisions for protecting farmer-managed seed systems or indigenous varieties The law was prepared with significant technical help from the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), USAID, and multinational seed corporations including Bayer (formerly Monsanto), with minimal talk from the smallholder farmers who form over 70% of Nigeria's agricultural workforce (National Agricultural Seeds Council, 2020; Environmental Rights Action, 2020).

Enforcement has stood rough but increasingly aggressive. In northern states like Kano and Kaduna, where commercial farming is more set, agricultural extension officers have conducted raids on informal seed markets. In southeastern regions, enforcement remains spotty, but farmers report growing anxiety about traditional practices now technically criminalized (Rural Women Farmers Association, 2021). As Mariann Bassey-Orovwuje from Friends of the Earth Nigeria put it: "This law reads like it was written for commercial exporters, not for the farmers who feed this country" (Environmental Rights Action, 2020, p. 17).

What the Act doesn't do is recognize traditional seed practices. There's no protection for farmers who save or trade seeds within their communities. There's no distinction between large-scale retail activity and a neighbor gifting seeds after harvest. In effect, the Act draws a hard line through an agricultural system that has always existed in shades of grey.

Seeds as Culture: Memory, Meaning, and Traditional Knowledge.

The NASC Act's failure to recognize traditional seed systems reflects a deeper misunderstanding seeds in Nigeria are not merely agricultural inputs but vessels of culture and identity. This dimension is entirely absent from the law's technical framework.For Elder Ekanem in Akwa

Ibom, the country's focus on yield misses the point entirely. "We have seeds for carnival, seeds for mourning, seeds for healing," he says. "But the law only sees numbers" (personal communication, January 10, 2023).This cultural dimension manifests in several ways that defy quantification:

Ritual and Spiritual Significance

In many Nigerian communities, specific seed varieties play central roles in traditional ceremonies. Among the Yoruba, certain varieties of cola nut are essential for naming ceremonies and marriages. In Igbo communities, particular yam cultivars are required for ancestral rituals (Oguamanam, 2021). The NASC Act makes no provision for preserving these culturally significant varieties, treating all seeds as interchangeable commodities differentiated only by yield and disease resistance.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

Traditional seed practices embody sophisticated systems of knowledge transmission. When a grandmother selects seeds based on characteristics invisible to laboratory testing—flavor profiles, cooking properties, or adaptability to microclimate variations—she passes down embodied knowledge that cannot be captured in certification processes.Professor Chidi Oguamanam notes that "The NASC Act assumes value comes from the lab. But farmers measure value in flavor, tradition, adaptability. And that's a form of knowledge too" (Oguamanam, 2021, p. 37).

The State's Vision: Food Security and Agricultural Modernization

To be fair, the Nigerian government faces legitimate pressures driving its seed sector reforms. The country's population is projected to double by 2050, and food imports already cost the nation billions annually. Officials view seed regulation as critical to increasing yields and reducing dependence on foreign grain (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022). Minister of Agriculture Mohammed Abubakar has repeatedly stated that "traditional methods won't feed the future" (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022, p. 3). This position is supported by large-scale commercial farmers who have seen enhanced productivity with certified seeds. For operations managing thousands of hectares, the reliability and uniformity of certified seed can mean the difference between profit and bankruptcy.

The government's vision aligns with dominant global narratives about agricultural development, emphasizing:

- Standardization and quality control through formal certification
- Integration into global agricultural value chains
- Scientific breeding for increased yield and disease resistance
- Private sector investment in agricultural inputs

These priorities are recalled in Nigeria's Agricultural Promotion Policy (2016-2020) and ensuing agricultural growth frameworks, which place the nation as an emerging agricultural powerhouse following the sample of countries like Brazil (World Bank, 2021).

But these advantages aren't felt equally across Nigeria's diverse farming landscape. For largescale agribusinesses with entry to capital, irrigation, and mechanization,

formal certification makes sense. For smallholder farmers operating with limited resources and relying on local knowledge, the barriers to compliance are prohibitively high.

Corporate Footprints in Nigerian Soil: Following the Money

Behind the NASC Act's technical language lies a story of power and economic interests. Seed corporations like Bayer (formerly Monsanto) and Syngenta have made no secret of their interest in Nigeria, Africa's most populous market. The NASC Act benefits these companies by establishing regulatory structures that protect proprietary seed varieties and create new market opportunities (Bayer, 2019).

These corporations are joined by international donors and aid agencies who see standardized seed laws as prerequisites to global investment. USAID, the World Bank, and the Gates Foundation have contributed millions to projects emphasizing formalization, commercialization, and scalability in Nigeria's seed sector (USAID, 2022).

The financial connections are difficult to ignore:

- The drafting of the NASC Act received technical assistance from USAID's Feed the Future program, which explicitly aims to create markets for U.S. agricultural inputs
- The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), a major Gates Foundation initiative, provided policy guidance and lobbying support for the law
- The World Bank's APPEALS project, which has invested $200 million in Nigeria's agriculture sector, made alignment with the NASC Act a condition for certain funding streams

As agricultural researcher Jessie Luna observes, "Development money always comes with expectations often shaped far from the farms it's meant to help" (Luna, 2020, p. 452).
The influence of these players is visible in the law's priorities. While setting detailed protections for retail seed developers, it contains no requirements securing farmers' rights to save, exchange, or develop their own seed varieties rights identified in international agreements like the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, which Nigeria approved in 2002.

Seeds of Resistance: From Courtrooms to Communities

Despite these powerful forces, Nigerian farmers have not passively accepted the new seed regime. Resistance has emerged across multiple scales, from organized legal challenges to everyday acts of quiet defiance. In early 2020, thousands of farmers joined a "Seed Freedom March" in Kano. They carried traditional seed containers, chanted in local languages, and demanded recognition of farmers' rights to save and share what they grew (Environmental Rights Action, 2020).

Figure 3. Farmers protesting at the 2020 Seed Freedom March in Kano, Nigeria. Photo credit: Seed Freedom Netw.

Following this public pressure, coalitions of civil society organizations including Environmental Rights Action and the Women Farmers Advancement Network started legally challenging aspects of the NASC Act. Their efforts have concentrated on demonstrating how requirements illegalizing seed protection violate both Nigeria's constitution and international accords recognizing farmers' rights.

These advocacy efforts have produced some benefits. In 2022, the NASC introduced limited exemptions for "traditional varieties" through administrative regulations, though critics note these exemptions are narrowly defined and difficult to claim in practice (National Agricultural Seeds Council, 2022).

Community Seed Banks and Knowledge Documentation

At the grassroots level, resistance takes the form of preservation and documentation initiatives. In Enugu State, cassava farmer Chinedu Nwosu established a community seed bank after realizing elderly community members were the last repository of knowledge about disappearing varieties. With support from a local NGO, he now maintains over 50 crop types each labeled, stored, and reported alongside its cultural history and farming effects."These seeds are our heritage," he explains. "You can't barcode that" (personal communication, March 5, 2023).

Similar seed banks have emerged across Nigeria, often with support from organizations like the Development Fund Nigeria and the Nigerian Organic Agriculture Network. These initiatives combine traditional storage methods with modern documentation techniques, creating physical and digital archives of agricultural biodiversity and associated knowledge (African Centre for Biodiversity, 2020).

Everyday Resistance

Most resistance, however, occurs through farmers' everyday practices—what political scientist James Scott calls "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 2017). Farmers continue exchanging seeds through kinship networks, disguising these exchanges as gifts rather than commercial

transactions to avoid legal penalties. Some communities have developed coded language to discuss seed varieties and exchange opportunities, particularly in areas where enforcement is more aggressive.

Abubakar Mohammed, a sorghum farmer in Jigawa, exemplifies this quiet resistance: "My father showed me how to pick the best seeds. You don't need a lab for that," he says. "Now I'm told that unless some stranger with a clipboard signs off, what I've done for 40 years doesn't count. So I keep doing it, but now we call it something else when officials visit" (personal communication, February 2023).
These forms of resistance are not merely economic or political but deeply cultural—they represent the defense of knowledge systems and identities under threat of erasure.

Personal Reflections: Seeds Across Borders

Growing up in Nigeria, my relationship with seeds was never abstract. I remember squatting beside my grandmother in the courtyard of our Lagos home as she prepared the soil with her hands no tools, just tactile memory. She didn't speak of "agronomic data" or "climate adaptation," but she knew which seeds needed deeper soil, which preferred shade, and which should be planted with silent prayer.

When I moved to the United States, I carried that memory with me. But in this new landscape, I quickly learned that seeds are products, not stories. You buy them in packets with barcodes. You follow instructions on laminated tags. The intimacy is gone. That disconnection struck me most vividly when I walked into a Walmart Garden center one spring and saw rows of neatly packaged seed packets. The exact varieties—carrots, corn, tomatoes were repeated, genetically uniform and tightly packaged. My first thought was: What happens to the flavors? The variations? The conversations between land and grower that shaped each season?

In Nigeria, two farmers might grow the same crop but swear by different seed lines, passed through kinship, stored in gourds, and planted according to the moon. That kind of diversity—not just biological but cultural is what laws like the NASC Act risk erasing, not through neglect but by legal design. This personal experience helped me understand what's really at stake in Nigeria's seed struggles: not just regulation, but memory. The knowledge my grandmother held,

the hands that knew how to choose seeds without formal certification—those practices risk being classified as backward or illegal rather than recognized as sophisticated systems of knowledge transmission adapted to local conditions.

The Broader African Context: Continental Patterns

Nigeria's seed struggles reflect broader tensions playing out across Africa as countries navigate competing visions of agricultural development. Similar conflicts over seed laws have emerged in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, often following strikingly similar patterns (African Centre for Biodiversity, 2020).

In Ghana, farmers successfully pressured the government to withdraw from UPOV 91, an international plant variety protection treaty that would have restricted farmers' seed rights. Kenya has seen ongoing legal battles over its Seed and Plant Varieties Act, which analysts argue privileges commercial breeders over farmer managed seed systems (African Centre for Biodiversity, 2020).

These continental patterns reveal the broader forces at work development agencies, multinational corporations, and philanthropic foundations promoting a singular vision of agricultural modernization based on formalization, privatization, and commercialization. This vision often conflicts with the diverse agricultural practices that have sustained African communities for generations.

The core message emerging from farmers' movements across the continent is consistent: farmers want support, not surveillance; collaboration, not control; and policies that recognize the value of existing agricultural knowledge rather than replacing it wholesale.

Pathways to Pluralism: Bridging Knowledge Systems

Despite the apparent conflict, there are emerging examples of more balanced approaches that respect both formal and informal seed systems. These initiatives suggest possibilities for policies that support agricultural innovation without erasing traditional knowledge.

In Kaduna State, a pilot program is testing simplified seed registration protocols for smallholder farmer cooperatives. By reducing fees and documentation requirements while maintaining basic quality standards, the program has enabled the formal registration of over 20 traditional varieties previously excluded from the certification system (National Agricultural Seeds Council, 2022).

In Oyo and Benue states, researchers from the National Root Crops Research Institute are collaborating with farmers to develop open-access, participatory breeding programs. These initiatives explicitly value farmers' knowledge about local growing conditions and preferences, incorporating this expertise into development of new varieties that remain in the public domain (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2022). Agricultural sociologist Juliana Reno captures the promise of these approaches: "Plural seed systems give farmers real options—not just expensive ones" (African Centre for Biodiversity, 2020, p. 43).

For this pluralism to flourish, Nigeria needs legal reforms that:

- Protect farmer-to-farmer seed exchanges and community seed banks
- Create streamlined registration pathways for indigenous varieties
- Recognize collective intellectual property rights for traditional knowledge
- Ensure farmers' participation in agricultural policymaking

These aren't radical demands—they're calls to make the law reflect the country it governs, acknowledging the diverse agricultural practices that have fed Nigeria long before formal seed certification existed.

Conclusion: Seeds of Sovereignty

This essay has examined how Nigeria's 2019 NASC Act represents more than technical regulation—it embodies a clash between different ways of valuing and knowing seeds. The law prioritizes standardization, commercialization, and integration into global agricultural systems at the expense of cultural practices, community knowledge, and local adaptation. Yet the resistance to this law demonstrates that Nigerian farmers are not passive recipients of agricultural policy but active defenders of their seed sovereignty. Through legal advocacy, community organization, and everyday practices, they insist that agricultural development must respect existing knowledge systems rather than replace them.

As Nigeria faces climate change, increasing food costs, and population growth, the question of who controls seeds will only grow more urgent. But the answer lies in adopting plurality, acknowledging that both laboratory science and grandmothers' knowledge have crucial roles to play in ensuring food security and cultural continuity.

From agroecological experiments to digital seed archives, from youth workshops to farmer networks, a new generation is carrying this vision forward—not with slogans, but with shared meals, saved seeds, and stubborn belief in a future where development serves the people who grow the food, not just the institutions that write the rules. When asked what gives her hope, Mariam Usman smiles and points to her daughter, who is spreading millet on a mat to dry. "She knows the stories too," Mariam says. "And as long as we remember, the seeds will grow" (personal communication, January 2023).

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Footnotes