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The status of soybean culture in Africa

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Only a small fraction of the global soybean grain stock is contributed by Africa, however soybean remains a strategically important crop on the continent. Ten countries produce 95% of the soybeans in Africa, with Nigeria, South Africa, Malawi and Zambia being the main producers. While South Africa and Zambia have large commercial soybean farming sectors, in most countries production comes primarily or exclusively from smallholder farmers on farms of 3 ha or less. A pervasive problem amongst smallholder farmers in most African countries is a lack of access to inputs such as seed, fertilizer, inoculants, herbicides/pesticides/fungicides, technical advice and machinery. Along with biotic and abiotic constraints, these factors likely all contribute to the low yields experienced on the continent. Access to technology via seed is seen as pivotal in the development of a soybean culture. A limited or aging cultivar list in a country reflects stagnating research and potential barriers in the variety release process. In countries where there is private sector involvement, the average age of cultivars on the market is generally less than ten years. The lack of intellectual property protection is seen as a disincentive to private sector involvement and access to technology. Africa has been suggested to be one of the few possible frontiers for future expansion of soybean production. Suitable land for soybean production in southern Africa is in the same order of magnitude as that currently in production in South America. There are obvious similarities of environment, and macroeconomic and governance conditions existing in South America in the 1980s-1990s to current conditions in southern Africa. Crucial differences will, however, hamper a South American scale soybean boom but there are early indications that modest growth is underway.