



Whitegold in Ethiopia Sowing the seeds

For more than 3 million smallholder farmers, the white pea bean industry is a source of employment, food, and income. How did a neglected staple grain become a US\$90 million export business?

Back in 1972, a bean variety named Mexican 142 was released in Ethiopia for commercial canning and became the leading variety. But without a supply of high-quality bean seed, farmers saved and planted their own seed. Over time, grain quality eroded, and prices went down.

In 2004, the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR) and International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), working through the Pan-Africa Bean Research Alliance (PABRA), brought together bean researchers, extension staff, exporters, traders, and representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, NGOs, and seed producers in a concerted effort to remove bottlenecks: low quality of seed available to farmers; disorganization along the value chain; and farmers' lack of experience in growing beans. Improved varieties, the partners agreed, were an ideal incentive to kick-start productivity.

Over the last decade, hundreds of bean varieties have been tested for their ability to beat drought and high temperatures, while meeting export quality standards. Only the varieties that clear all these hurdles make it into farmers' fields.

The work is already paying off: Newly released varieties, like Awash 1 or "white gold," are well adapted to local conditions and meet the stringent requirements of export markets. The number of organizations multiplying improved beans in Ethiopia has nearly tripled from 15 to 43.

Demand for quality white pea beans is higher than ever. Valued at more than US\$90 million (up from just \$8 million a decade ago), the export market links poor farmers in Ethiopia's bean corridor with European consumers of canned beans.

Improved varieties and access to quality seed have helped farmers boost bean yields. Engaging partners – government agencies, NGOs, and farmer organizations – has also proved essential for delivering impact.

