

Markets make a come-back –

Diversity displays and seed fairs



Seed fair in Cajabamba, Ecuador: Women coming from remote villages present their tuber crops classified and labelled in the Quechua language (photo: R. Bode)

The more farmers – the more varieties

In the Andean region, '*ferias*' – fairs – were annual events at which farmers sold their products and stocked up on seed and planting material for the next season. The farmers who gathered at these fairs came with products from many different agroecological zones of the wild Andean landscape. Not all crops can be grown and processed at all altitudes so a crop like maize, for example, would be traded for local freeze-dried potatoes.

In old Zimbabwe, communities were expected to donate seed to the royal granary. This practice was known as the '*zhunde ramambo*', and every community had its own ritual for displaying and storing the king's seed.

Special events held every year between harvest time and the new sowing season are an age-old custom of traditional agriculture. With the modernization of society and the emergence and consolidation of a formal seed sector, these old structures have disintegrated and traditional ceremonies like the '*zhunde ramambo*' have tended to die out.

Now efforts are in hand to revive the traditional fairs. These will facilitate the exchange of seeds once more and begin a process of raising awareness of the richness of agricultural diversity. The same is true of the livestock sector. Livestock markets are another age-old tradition which is of major cultural importance to particular farming regions. ►

What are seed fairs for?

Typically, seed fairs are one-day events where farmers display samples of the seeds or plant material that they use in their fields and vegetable patches. It may be the full range of cultivated species – from seed crops to tuber and root species to fruits – or the range of varieties of a single crop. Fairs usually take place between the harvest and the new sowing season, when farmers routinely have plentiful supplies of seed and other planting material. The fairs are also popular social occasions where people meet, exchange news and views, and eat and drink together.

They are also occasions for farmers to look out for varieties they may have lost, or have always wanted to try growing. Knowledge is passed on at the same time as seeds are handed over: which site does this variety prefer, and what is the best use for that one? There is a special interest in old varieties which were believed to have been lost in the region. Frequently there are also diversity contests: the farmer who displays the most diversity is awarded a prize. Sometimes the prizes are a real economic incentive to the farmers to introduce more diversity into their fields or their vegetable gardens. The organizing committee nominates the judges and sets out the criteria for the judging of the material. The prizes awarded to the diversity contest winners underline the importance of agrobiodiversity, and also pay tribute to the achievements of those who are custodians of the cultural heritage.

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Seed fairs



Seed collection in Zambia (photo: G. Wesseler)

► Working successfully on every continent

In regions all around the world, seed fairs are among the most popular and successful activities for promoting agrobiodiversity. Once introduced, the fairs usually attract more and more exhibitors each year. The most renowned are the seed fairs in the Andes region, in Nepal and in sub-Saharan Africa. In Nepal and the Andean countries, both regions where farmers have domesticated a range of crops over several millennia, seed fairs play an important role in supporting on-farm conservation programmes.

Reports of the sheer extent of the diversity on display at these fairs can be quite astonishing. At seed fairs in Zimbabwe, over 250 varieties of 25 different crops have been counted. The 32 participants in a seed fair in a rural community in Peru displayed over 800 seed samples of 17 different arable crops, plus a variety of apples, aromatic and medicinal plants.

In Zimbabwe, the seed fairs are organized as complements to agricultural shows, which usually focus on modern agricultural technology, favouring uniform varieties. At agricultural shows, only registered varieties may be entered. So farmers much prefer the seed fairs where they need pay nothing to display their seeds and offer them for sale. Visitors also enjoy the fairs because they can easily make contact with exhibitors, negotiate payment or barter, and even arrange to visit the exhibitor later on his or her farm.

In Cuba, seed fairs are events where farmers are invited to on-farm or on-station demonstration plots where conservation work is in progress. In this way they can evaluate lots of varieties and then make up their minds from which ones they want to have samples. In 2002 in Mali, German Agro Action organized local seed fairs to help farmers who had lost all their millet seed

Experience from Ecuador

The National Department of Plant Genetic Resources and Biotechnology (DENAREF) in Ecuador views seed markets as a kind of barometer which indicates how much genetic diversity is being used by farmers in a certain region. In the province of Chimborazo, DENAREF used the '*Ferias de Conservacion de Semillas*' from 1999 to 2002 to ascertain how much diversity exists at village level among Andean tuber crops. Registration forms were issued, and a panel of judges was convened to evaluate the information and select the winners of the diversity contest. The number of participating farmers and communities grew over the next few years and a flourishing exchange of planting material developed. Researchers used the seed fairs as an indication of where diversity was particularly rich and where its custodians were especially active. Then they could visit and interview these farmers in greater depth.

	1st Seed fair 1999	2nd Seed fair 2000	3rd Seed fair 2001	4th Seed fair 2002
Number of participants	115	281	307	529
Number of communities	23	22	29	70
Number of communities in Las Huaconas area*	7	8	9	6
Ratio of women to men	54% men 46% women	56% men 44% women	60% men 40% women	35% men 65% women

*Communities not directly involved in the project.

after a two-year drought to make contact with potential suppliers. The seed transactions were facilitated with a voucher system. Thus farmers who had lost their seed in the crisis could replenish their seed stock, knowing that it would be adapted to the specific local conditions.

Initiative is called for

Organizing a seed fair is relatively straightforward and no special conditions or supporting context are required, but it takes considerable time and effort. If the fair will only be held once a year, it can easily be integrated with a project's other tasks, e.g. combined with such activities as an agricultural show, but the



Maize in Rwanda (photo: G. Ulutunçok)



Diversity of chilli varieties, Cotonou, Benin (photo: G. Ulutunçok)

effort is only worthwhile if plans are made to run the fair regularly in future. The most important prerequisite is a 'project champion' – someone with initiative who is willing to organize the first seed fair, including the logistics, the prizes and the judges. Furthermore a committee or a community group must take joint responsibility for the planning and implementation. This committee may need support in the early years to make the seed fair a sustainable activity.

Only if the farmers realize that the fair is not just an ordinary market for buying and selling will it have a positive impact on the use and conservation of agricultural diversity. It is therefore important never to lose sight of the original goal of stimulating awareness of the diversity of crop plants. The awarding of prizes must be done with absolute integrity and the judging criteria must be comprehensible and transparent. Any suspect practices are liable to do long-term harm to the fair.

Prelude to other activities

For a village, a seed fair can be a prelude to other activities which enhance the functioning of the local seed supply system. For example, this may include the establishment of a community seed bank or the setting out of demonstration plots. Another potential effect of the seed fair may be to encourage communities to develop more comprehensive and better integrated conservation programmes. DENAREF in Ecuador has built up some positive experience in involving communities and their administrations in the organization of seed fairs. The communities have a budget and may well be interested in including a seed fair as part of their plans.

In Zimbabwe an NGO supported by GTZ organized a seed fair for the first time in 1994 after a community had expressed its seed security problems. Finally, the seed fairs evolved into a Participatory Extension Approach (PEA) and spiralled off into field days where farmers jointly evaluated variety trials and made exposure visits to other communities.

Gender

A seed fair offers particularly good opportunities for involving women. In many cultures, women are responsible for seed selection and storage. As a consequence, they are often more knowledgeable than the men about seed – and how the different varieties perform in the field, the kitchen and the market. With a seed fair as a starting point, women may then be drawn in to other activities, such as participatory selection of varieties or work relating to seed banks.

Inventories and monitoring

Seed fairs offer farmers a good opportunity to collaborate with researchers and development agencies that may be working in their locality to take inventories of the diversity of crops and varieties used in the area. In Zimbabwe following the droughts in the early 1990s, the fairs revealed that a large number of seed varieties – even very old varieties – were still to be found. Via the seed fairs, it is possible to find the farmers with the greatest diversity. In collaboration with them, it is then possible to collect information on the varieties and their management, and to plan more in-depth studies. This may be the starting point for developing an integrated conservation programme. Inventories and information on the species in use are of interest to researchers and farmers alike. In India and Nepal, for example, they resulted in the setting up of 'Community Biodiversity Registers'.

Agricultural diversity contributes to food security, particularly in marginal locations with unstable environmental conditions. This is probably the key reason why farmers are constantly seeking out new and old varieties, and demonstrate great willingness to try out interesting novelties. For instance, DENAREF's monitoring revealed that the number of Andean tuber crop varieties grown by farmers – including mashua (*Tropaeolum tuberosum*), oca (*Oxalis tuberosa*), melloco (*Ullucus tuberosus*) and potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) – had increased after old native varieties were brought into circulation through seed fairs. Which proves yet again that making use of diversity is the best way to conserve it.

Further information

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Seed fair in Zambia (photos: G. Wesseler)

The **People and Biodiversity** issue paper series aims to:

- arouse interest in the topic of conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity,
- present in a concise manner concrete approaches for action and experience,
- explain new terms and concepts in the thematic area of biodiversity,
- encourage and stimulate readers to mainstream biodiversity issues in development cooperation projects.

We would welcome your comments and experience. They will help us to improve this series step by step.

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