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COMMUNITY SEED BANKS

Seeds in formal and informal system

Seeds are a main source of all food and agricultural production. On-farm seed practices have been responsible for the management, conservation and renewal of genetic diversity in agriculture. Scientifically supported breeding started only in the 20th century.

Today, the seed sector appears to be divided into two major systems: a formal seed system (FSS) and an informal one (ISS). The ISS has remained important in terms of numbers of people using and depending on it. However, the FSS, enforced by public and private law and corporate interests, is dominant and tends to marginalize and rule out the informal system. While creating microeconomic dependencies for farmers, the formal system is not able to create sufficient crop diversity and adapted varieties to answer all local demands of farmers and consumers. That is one reason for the foundation of Community Seed Banks (CSBs) as part of informal seed systems.

Community Seed Banks

CSBs have been founded since the early 1980th in many parts of the world, with various forms and functions. Their main aims are to address the loss of agricultural diversity and to enhance access to seeds adapted to local conditions that the market does not provide for adequately, often based on a participatory approach of community crop management and improvement.

In recent years, several case studies and analysis on CSB worldwide have been published. Most of these studies focus on examples from developing countries, whilst very little has been published on experiences from developed countries.

CSB in Europe are based on seed savers' and farmers' networks. Their role may be less existential for the members of the respective community, compared to CSB in developing countries with a high degree of self-sufficiency. However, they play an important role in European societies with regards to the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources and in all the cases where easy access to public genebanks is not granted to farmers and gardeners.

DIVERSIFOOD aims at mapping Community Seed Banks in Europe and at collecting and comparing their history, functions and experiences. European CSBs are often part of civil society initiatives and associations. They are often "communities of practice" rather than communities in a geographic / regional sense.

AT FIRST GLANCE

Community Seed Banks (CSB) emerge in various forms worldwide. What do CSB in Western countries and in countries of the South have in common? What are the special roles of CSB in Europe, their strengths and challenges?

Embedding crop diversity and
networking for local high quality
food systems

Defining Community Seed Banks

CSBs dispose of **facilities for storing seeds and/or of areas for growing collections**, aiming at the preservation of genetic and cultivar diversity of crops and at making those seeds available. These facilities can be centralized for some CSB. Other CSB have a decentralized approach where several persons within the CSB store seeds and manage collections.



CSBs are **managed by a community**. Communities may be informal networks or formalized legal entities (e.g. associations, co-operatives) consisting of more than one member. Community Seed Banks **belong to the informal seed system**. They may be part of the **third (non-profit) sector** – e.g. civil-society-organizations. However, they neither belong to the first (public) nor the second (private for profit enterprises / market) sector.

The community manages the seed bank following certain **common objectives** based on **shared values and collective rules**, creating a specific **culture and identity**. These rules may regulate access to the seeds, know-how and information, but also the way the objectives are evolved – or anything else that is important for the functioning of the community.

The way forward

The DIVERSIFOOD project will provide a more precise definition as well as a SWOT analysis of CSB in Europe through expert talks, surveys and workshops. In a systematic comparative analysis, DIVERSIFOOD will search for answers to the following questions:

- What approaches, components and modalities characterise CSB models in “The West” in comparison to “the South”, and what can we learn from each other?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of “Western” CSB?
- What policies and practices are required to promote the role of CSB in Europe as safeguards and promoters of agricultural diversity?
- What roles could CSB play in the future of agriculture in Europe?

Suggested readings

De Boef W et al (eds.): *Community Biodiversity Management. Promoting Resilience and the Conservation of Plant Genetic Resources*. Bioersity 2013. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH: *Farmers' Seed Systems. The challenge of linking formal and informal seed systems*. Documentation of the Expert Talk, 4th June 2014, Bonn. GIZ, Bonn, 2015. Shrestha P, Vernooy R, Chaudhary P (eds.): *Community seed banks in Nepal: past, present and future*. LI-BIRD, Nepal, 2013. Vernooy R, Shrestha P, Sthapit B (eds.): *Community seed banks. Origins, Evolution and Prospects*. Bioersity, 2015. Réseau Semences Paysannes, 2014, *Les Maisons des Semences Paysannes: Regards sur la gestion collective de la biodiversité cultivée en France*. 80 pages. Collectif d'auteurs, 2015, *Gérer collectivement la biodiversité cultivée*, Eduagri Editions. 224 pages.