Supporting community seedbanks to realize farmers’ rights

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Introduction
This brief has been prepared by Bioversity International for delegates to the 2016 Global Consultation on Farmers’ Rights1. The brief aims to raise awareness among delegates and Contracting Parties to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (the Plant Treaty) of the important contribution that community seedbanks can make to realizing farmers’ rights and enhancing the use of crop diversity, crucial for local and global food security. At the Sixth Session of the Governing Body, under Resolution 5/2015, the Secretariat was requested “to engage Contracting Parties and relevant organizations to take initiatives to gather information at national, regional and global levels for exchanging views, experiences and best practices on the implementation of Farmers’ Rights.” This brief aims to contribute to that body of information.

Understanding the concept of farmers’ rights
Article 9 of the Plant Treaty addresses the rights of farmers to save, sell and exchange seed, the protection of farmers’ traditional knowledge, benefit sharing, and participation in decision-making (Moore and Tymowski, 2005). Understanding the different concepts and perspectives on farmers’ rights, constraints and potential disincentives is crucial to realizing those rights (Andersen, 2016). An ‘ownership’ approach views that farmers be rewarded individually or collectively for the genetic material or related traditional knowledge appropriated from them. It is based on property rights and exclusive ownership and includes protection from misappropriation. However, the legal environment, complexity of seed laws and variety protection under agreements such as TRIPS and expectations of monetary benefits can lead to disincentives for farmers to maintain agrobiodiversity. A ‘stewardship’ approach would reward farmers collectively for their innovation and maintenance of agrobiodiversity for the benefit of mankind, “partly through the multilateral system [of access and benefit sharing under the Plant Treaty] and official development assistance” (Andersen, 2016, p. 132). It encourages the sharing and use of farmers’
traditional knowledge, thereby protecting it from extinction. Both approaches relate to rights and responsibilities or obligations on different parties towards the environment or biodiversity. However, the stewardship approach takes an ecological view of the interdependence between biodiversity and society while acknowledging farmers’ inherent rights.

**Nurturing ecological citizenship or stewardship**

The stewardship approach is consistent with ecological citizenship, which is the active participation of citizens towards environmental sustainability, driven by fairness and justice (Dobson, 2010). Farmers, consumers and citizens become environmental stewards, fulfilling their obligations to the environment, when they understand the link between their actions and impacts on biodiversity and act accordingly. Nurturing pro-environmental behavior or ecological citizenship is best done through lived experiences of community livelihoods and ‘tactile space’ (Carolan, 2007). This is demonstrated by community-based natural resource management such as community seedbanks (de Boef et al., 2013). Case studies of seed-savers groups in the USA show that citizens ‘learn’ more effectively through experiencing the growing of seeds with their own hands, understanding abstract and distant meanings such as ‘genes’ and ‘biodiversity’ (Carolan, 2007). By participating in action research, when they are directly involved in participatory plant breeding and developing their own varieties, farmers have a better understanding of the value of biodiversity conservation and this motivates the community further (Borja and Oyarzun, 2016).

**Custodian farmers and community seedbanks**

Farmers have been exchanging, selecting and improving crop varieties and seeds for millennia. As ‘custodians’ they are seen as conserver, innovator and promoter of biodiversity and are formally recognized as such, in India, Uganda and elsewhere (Clancy and Vernooy, 2016). In many countries, community seedbanks have been set up to conserve local farmers’ varieties and to ensure the supply of seeds to local communities, for example following natural disasters. They are managed by local farming families and communities, guided by principles of “distributive justice, reciprocity and equity “ (Pistorius et al., 2016). Seed-saver groups in Canada and elsewhere are usually made up of hobby farmers, breeders and gardeners interested in keeping seed diversity alive, creating public awareness and exchanging seeds widely (Berger et al., 2016). Community seedbanks have many other benefits, including: raising awareness of the socio-economic value, both present and future potential, of otherwise forgotten and neglected varieties, increasing food sovereignty and seed autonomy; establishing shared responsibilities, collective decision-making and cooperation; keeping traditional knowledge alive; and empowerment of communities (Vernooy et al., 2015). The Mamudpur seed hut in Bangladesh now houses 89 local crop varieties, from an original 11 major crops and farmers refer to the seed hut as their “strength” (Sobhan et al., 2015).

**Challenges and opportunities**

Community seedbanks can be a platform to realize farmers’ rights through: legal recognition of the seedbank as a farmer organization for conservation; use and distribution of seeds; de facto protection of traditional knowledge; effective equitable benefit sharing; and meaningful participation in decision-making (Vernooy, 2016). There are many challenges to establishing and maintaining community seedbanks, including issues of governance and management, technical and capacity issues related to seed management, networking and financial support, and
an enabling policy and legal environment (Vernooy et al., 2015). For community seedbanks to be sustainable, building human and social capital will need technical and financial support from external agencies.

**Strengthening community seedbanks**

There are examples of successful community seedbanks and organizations already supporting them, yet community seedbanks remain largely disconnected and their potential untapped (Vernooy et al., 2015). A global platform for community seedbanks would ensure connection to each other and to national and international systems and genebanks. A plan to create this platform is proposed by Bioversity International. Community seedbanks could serve shared custodianship of local crop diversity without undermining the roles of custodian farmers (Clancy and Vernooy, 2016). To develop the platform further, support from other donor agencies is required. Through technical and organizational support and working with local and national governments, community seedbanks would receive legal recognition as farmer organizations and become part of a global system for the conservation, use and distribution of seeds. Farmers and communities would participate meaningfully in all decision-making, share knowledge and be rewarded for their roles as custodians of biodiversity. Thus farmers’ rights, as envisaged by the Plant Treaty, to save, sell and exchange seed, and the protection of farmers’ traditional knowledge, benefit sharing and participation in decision-making, would be realized.

**Conclusions**

We hope this brief convinces readers of the key role that community seedbanks can play in realizing farmers’ rights and achieving food security. With commitment and goodwill from farming communities, research organizations and government institutions, through strengthened community seedbanks, farmers would continue to be the world’s custodians of biodiversity and would be recognized and rewarded for this. Community seedbanks would reach their full potential to conserve and use crop diversity for sustainable livelihoods and food security and to halt the loss of biodiversity.

**Contracting parties** should integrate community seedbanks as a core component of the Plant Treaty’s strategic plans and increase voluntary contributions to the benefit-sharing fund targeting community seedbanks.

**National and local governments** should directly support community seedbanks technically and financially and promote crop and seed diversity activities such as food and seed fairs and festivals.

**National and local governments** should support civil society organizations to engage the public to nurture ecological citizenship and responsibility to biodiversity.

**Farming communities, agricultural extension services, NGOs and research organizations** should collaborate to establish a global platform for community seedbanks.

**All stakeholders** should commit to strengthen and formally support community seedbanks.

**References**


making it work for family farmers. Wageningen, ILEIA.


Endnotes
