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La Labranza no. 2 community seed bank – ‘We are a network’

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Purpose and evolution

La Labranza no. 2 community seed bank was established in 2007 to meet local farmers’ need for seed at the appropriate time for planting. Seed loans provided by government institutions and local markets had failed in the past. Producers were overwhelmed by debt they had incurred to purchase seed and fertilizers. Farmers’ mounting concerns over this situation coincided with an initiative started in 2000 by the Farmer to Farmer programme of the National Farmers’ and Ranchers’ Union (PCaC-UNAG from its Spanish name) in the region of Segovias to guarantee food security by rescuing local resources and creating community banks to conserve local seed.

The seed bank in La Labranza started with five families who stored their first seed stock in the home of one of the families, using sacks and silos provided by the owner. Each producer stored 2–11kg of maize and bean seeds (Plate 16). At the time, they agreed that ‘even if we don’t have anything to eat, that seed will not leave the bank’, and that agreement has been honoured to date. Other families joined the group when they saw the results. After six years in operation, the seed bank now has 40 member families from La Labranza no. 2 and the neighbouring communities of Labranza no. 1, La Naranjita and San José (Plate 17).

Roles and activities

The community seed bank’s main role is storing seed of local and domesticated varieties of staple grains produced by member farmers. Other functions include supplying seed during the planting season, promoting and conserving associated knowledge, developing technical capacities for seed management and fostering community organization. The community seed bank is a collective that encourages families to conserve their local varieties. The initial objective was to supply seed of local varieties to member families during the planting season. However, as the seed bank grew, founding families became self-sufficient and no longer required seed from the seed bank. They established their own family seed banks, which have now become a network. The seed

bank transcends the needs of the community and benefits farmers in neighbouring communities.

The community seed bank currently holds seven maize varieties (Yema de Huevo, Amarillo Claro, Blanco Fino, Carmen, Pujagua, Pujagua Negrito and Pujagua Rayado) and four bean varieties (Colombiano, Estelí 90, Boaqueño and Guaniseño Amarillo), which were collected by the first member families as they were disappearing from the region. Maize varieties are for personal consumption and are used in many traditional dishes (atoles, pozol, rosquillas, rosquetes, pinol, pinolillo, tamales and nacatamales), but mainly for preparing tortillas. As of June 2013, the bank held 830kg of maize and 780kg of beans. The varieties, which are well adapted to and tolerant of changing climatic conditions, are recovering their importance and market value in the community and the region.

The seed bank is currently a collective that organizes promotional campaigns, documents farmers' experiences and carries out farmer participatory seed improvement and quality seed production. The PCaC-UNAG network supports the bank's activities by facilitating knowledge sharing and providing training and resources to improve the facilities. Bank users (23 women and 17 men) are maize and bean producers.

The community seed bank also plays a social role in that it improves and strengthens gender relations in the community. Doña Carmen Picado, a prominent member of the collective, says the bank stimulates family union: 'We men and women are fighting for the same cause; we are united by strong links. The 23 women and 17 men, we feel like one big family; we work together. Everyone cooperates.'

Women are very active in the seed bank and the group dynamics are unique. The board is composed mainly of women. Both men and women are responsible for paying their share.

There's no difference; there are men who are punctual and honest; the same with women. They don't come up with excuses. We give them the date when the grain will be ready and they come and pay. Some women are single and very responsible with their debts. There's no difference; both men and women request basically the same,

adds Carmen Picado, La Labranza no. 2 seed bank coordinator and farmer extension agent in the PCaC-UNAG project.

The challenge is to be sustainable over time.

We can't live just from hoping to get help. We need to make this sustainable ourselves, not let it down. It has to last and become an example for other communities. We need to have enough seed to sell, not be borrowing all the time,

explains Carmen.

Governance and management

President, secretary, treasurer and two support people make up the seed bank's coordinating committee; four of the members are women and two are men. The committee was elected by representatives of the 40 member families. They meet once a month, but if urgent matters arise they may get together as many as three times a month. Their main duties include coordination, shipping, receiving seed, establishing dates for receipt and shipping, recording demand before planting, ensuring that agreed conditions are met on delivery, coordinating postharvest activities, following up on members during the growing cycle and coordinating field days, fairs and assemblies.

They have established their own regulations. Loan requests are received in April, right before the first growing cycle (May to June). The committee scrutinizes these requests. An important factor they take into account – to ensure that the bank will recover its seed – is whether the requesting farmer is well known as an honest person. On receiving seed from the bank, the farmer signs a promissory note and a contract in which he or she agrees to return seed of the same quality that has been weighed, cleaned, dried and is free of mould. When it comes to seed loans, bank members have priority, but non-members are also granted loans when enough seed is available. Interest on loans is 50 per cent. The regulations include members' duties and rights and specify the conditions under which seed loans are to be repaid. To date, there has been very little commercial exchange; when seed is sold, the profit is used to purchase materials and equipment (sacks, weights, etc.) or seed varieties not already available in the seed bank.

Seed fairs, traditionally held in October, are excellent opportunities for residents of the Madriz, Nueva Segovia and Estelí – and, this year, Matagalpa – municipalities to share knowledge about agronomic and cooking characteristics and properties of the various species and varieties used for handicrafts. Fairs are organized once a year by the community, with the financial support of PCaC-UNAG and other organizations in the region. Approximately 1,000 people participate. Generally, the community seed bank's coordinating committee takes the lead, but all members of the community participate in the activities.

This collective is well known for its creative contests, with prizes awarded to the best artisanal and traditional foods prepared with local seed, as well as to cultural presentations, including dancing, poetry and music composed by farmers around the theme of local seed conservation and environmental protection.

The community bank is growing and surplus seed is being accumulated. If the seed bank is to venture into seed commercialization, it would have to revise its current organization to deal with an activity in which it does not have much experience.

Technical issues

The technical committee, with support from collaborating members, is in charge of seed handling. Farmers clean, select and dry the seed to the required

moisture content for storage on their farms before delivering it to the bank. The process is carried out manually, as the farmers do not have hygrometers. Moisture content is assessed by biting the seed (if it breaks sharply with a cracking sound, then it is dry).

Varieties circulate constantly. As farmers meet the required conditions, they establish their own family bank and retain the best varieties for seed multiplication. In turn, the community seed bank acquires other varieties requested by new members; thus, there is constant renewal of material stored by the bank. Documentation is done by either recording experiences in writing, drawing on billboards or by organizing the information in passbooks coordinated by the national PCaC-UNAG network.

Assemblies, meetings, fairs, training courses and community social reunions are all mechanisms for interacting with bank users. Capacities are increased and skills are acquired and strengthened through formal and informal exchange and specific training courses. The most important technical challenge faced by the bank has to do with improving postharvest seed management, as humidity in the silos is still high.

Support, links and the institutional environment

To date, the only significant external support has been that from the national PCaC-UNAG network, which channels resources it receives from European nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The most important of these is SWISSAID. In the past, the Finnish Siemenpuu Foundation, the Belgian Veco and the Nicaraguan Alexander von Humboldt Centre supported the establishment of the facilities of the central and family banks and training and experience-sharing activities. *La Labranza* collective, its network of family banks and its community seed bank are part of the national PCaC-UNAG network, which in turn is part of an alliance of organizations called Seeds of Identity, supported by SWISSAID. The bank and the community are not part of any other system or network.

There is no record of maintenance costs for the community seed bank. However, the cost of labour for constructing and managing the bank was covered by the community. The PCaC-UNAG network has collaborated in providing resources for infrastructure, equipment and knowledge-sharing and training events. The PCaC-UNAG foresees at least two more years of support.

The lack of policies to stimulate conservation of native genetic resources has resulted in the loss of varieties to genetic erosion and preference for only a few varieties of staple grains. Initiatives such as the Identity Seed Campaign Alliance are currently demanding enactment of a legal framework to promote and protect local varieties of seed. The alliance operates as a network to lobby those holding influential positions on the issues of local seed varieties and biodiversity. Members of the alliance include the Grupo de Promoción de la Agricultura Ecológica, the Alexander von Humboldt Centre, the Grupo de Incidencia en Seguridad y Soberanía Alimentaria, the Movimiento Agroecológico de

Nicaragua, the PCaC-UNAG and SWISSAID. The two latter organizations provide financial support to the alliance.

However, municipal bylaws are being considered for promoting and protecting local agricultural biodiversity. A legal framework could stimulate production and consumption of local varieties, as well as protect our national genetic patrimony and inspire the creation of innovative organizational forms among communities to safeguard these genetic resources. One important example is the community and family seed banks for conserving seed of local varieties.

Achievements and sustainability

Bank members view the establishment of the community seed bank as important in that it has brought together farmers into a solid organization: farmers help each other, are united and define their goals as a group; the community gains recognition nationally and internationally; and bank members feel they have gained independence. Initially, the group set out to restore two varieties; today, 11 have been rescued.

Overall, farmers feel that they do not have to look for seed outside the community. The families who started the group now have their own bank at home, and there is plenty of seed available. Farmers are more self-sufficient, and food quality has improved. According to Carmen Picado,

Previously, people did not like yellow maize to make atole and tamales. Now they are trying it out and everyone says that yellow corn atole and tamales taste very good. The young ones are valuing again these typical foods which their parents had lost.

Excess seed is currently loaned to other communities. Quality seed is guaranteed, and farmers are advancing in participatory plant breeding to improve the variety known as 'Carmen'. Even though seed produced is competitively priced, which improves farmers' incomes, the risk in the medium term is that low prices of staple grains will discourage small farmers from growing them.

Achieving sustainability without external aid is the biggest challenge faced by the community seed bank. The seed bank could venture in a more proactive way into local and national markets. However, a favourable legislative framework would be required to certify seed of local varieties produced by these small farmers and to acknowledge the role they play in conserving the national genetic heritage. It is feasible to belong to a national system that recognizes and respects small farmers' seed production systems, stimulates local exchange and considers diversity as a potential and not as a weakness. To become part of an international system, farmer groups must be familiar with management and distribution of information and materials and be able to sign agreements based on international treaties.