

40 The role of community seed banks in adaptation to climate change in Mesoamerica

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In Mesoamerica, despite many successful experiences with community seed banks, some of which are described in this book (Chapters 16, 17, 26, 33), formal recognition of their important contribution to the conservation of agricultural biodiversity, food security and adaptation to climate change has yet to come. A promising advance in this direction is the recently developed *Strategic Action Plan to Strengthen Conservation and Use of Mesoamerican Plant Genetic Resources for Adapting Agricultural Systems to Climate Change* (Ramirez et al., 2014).

The plan was formulated over the course of 2012–2013 with funding from the Benefit-Sharing Fund of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Stakeholders from six countries in the region were involved in its development under the scientific guidance of Bioversity International’s Regional Office for the Americas. The resulting plan, supported by the Central American Council of Ministers, is structured in thematic sections focussing on in-situ/on-farm and ex-situ conservation, sustainable use, policies and institutions. Each section outlines actions to be carried out over the next ten years. Community seed banks are mentioned across all sections and associated with a number of priority activities reflecting their multifaceted purposes and legitimacy as local institutions that promote community-based conservation and sustainable use.

The ex-situ section of the strategic action plan outlines activities aimed at restructuring the conservation system in the region to boost efficiency and foster synergies among actors and institutions while reducing duplication of effort. The consideration of community seed banks within this new structure is based on recognition of the role they play in linking formal conservation institutions and farmers, thereby enhancing the flow of plant genetic resources within the system, especially those with adaptive traits. The importance of fostering connections and exchanges between community seed banks, including links with farmers from local communities not served by seed banks, is also stressed. The emphasis placed on strengthening seed systems highlights the role of community seed banks as decentralized repositories of locally adapted genetic diversity and associated traditional knowledge in the hands of farmers. The plan recognizes the contribution of community seed banks to the

maintenance of crops and landraces in the territories where they have acquired their distinctive features, and it suggests ways to integrate seed banks into programmes for strengthening biocultural territories and traditional food systems in the pursuit of food sovereignty, sustainability and health.

Among activities to improve the sustainable use of plant genetic resources, the plan includes the establishment of community seed banks and reserves in climate-vulnerable communities, given their capacity to respond quickly to environmental disasters and contribute to the restoration of local food security. The section on policy recognizes the importance of providing institutional support to community seed banks by formally recognizing their role in conservation and use of agricultural biodiversity, food security and climate change adaptation. This section also highlights the relevance of supporting community seed banks with implementation of farmers' rights legislation at the national level. Among the actions to strengthen capacity in the region, the plan calls for supporting further training of communities, as well as professionals in national institutions, in establishing and managing technically sound community seed banks, while strengthening their links to national and regional plant genetic resource programmes and initiatives.

The strategic action plan may be the first regional instrument to assign a formal role to community seed banks on a road map of interdisciplinary technical and policy actions centred on plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. The uptake of its recommendations by national decision-makers is the next essential step towards leveraging the role of communities in conserving, sustainably using and mobilizing the region's rich agricultural biodiversity in the wake of climate change.

Reference

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