

SETTING UP A COMMUNITY SEED BANK

What is this Action Sheet about?

This Action Sheet is about seed banks. If a community grows local crop varieties and knows of rare, useful plants, storing a wide variety of seeds in a seed bank can help farmers preserve local crop diversity. Farmers need seed to sow new crops. As well as being a storehouse of crop diversity, a seed bank is an emergency source of seed if crops fail due to pests, disease or bad weather.

What is local crop diversity?

Local crop diversity is the many different varieties and characteristics of crops in a particular area. Diversity is needed to protect the harvest from poor weather, insects or disease. For example, some varieties of maize have better protection against insects, and some varieties of maize survive better in a drought. If these varieties are lost, the farmer has less chance of producing a successful harvest as local conditions change year by year.

SEED BANK PROJECT IN EJERE, ETHIOPIA

The Farmers in Situ Conservation of Ethiopia's Plant Genetic Resources Project, supported by the United Nations, works with over 1000 farmers in Ejere, Ethiopia, 20% of which are women. Research found 26 varieties of wheat and teff with good yields, even without fertilizer input. The community seed bank was set up to protect this diversity. Farmers can borrow good crop varieties from the seed bank, but they must repay – in seed – with an interest rate of 20%. If they borrowed 10 kg of seed, they would have to give 12 kg back after the harvest. Farmers are pleased, because they save money on fertilizer. For example, one farmer took a loan of 30 kg of wheat from the seed bank, returned 36 kg to the seed bank after the harvest, but still managed to make 150 kg profit!



Seed bank in Ejere (Image: UNDP Newsletter)

How can we decide if a seed bank would be useful?

To decide if a seed bank is needed, answer these two questions:

1. Do farmers grow local and unusual varieties of food crops?
2. Do many farmers exchange and share seeds with their families and neighbours?

If you answer yes to both questions, then farmers are already protecting crop diversity, so it may not be necessary to start a seed bank. When many farmers grow local varieties and exchange seeds, they ensure that good quality seeds are always available.

But sometimes farmers find it hard to exchange or save seeds. In some parts of the world, farmers do not work together. In other areas, poor yields force farmers to eat their seeds. In these cases, a carefully organized seed bank will ensure that there are always some local seeds available. Exchanging and sharing seeds among many farmers and across large areas will help keep seeds strong and diverse.

What is a community seed bank?

Just as money is stored in a bank account until it is needed, seeds are stored in a seed bank until they are needed. For example, they might be needed after crops fail due to drought, insect damage or disease.

A community seed bank could be a collection of seeds stored in a shed or in some public building such as a health clinic. It could be a collection of clay pots dug in to the floor of the family granary. Or it could be bags of seeds on the kitchen shelf. The seed bank belongs to the community. Wherever possible, farmers should keep their own seeds as well.

BOTSWANA SEED STORAGE The Permaculture Trust of Botswana set up a community seed bank program. The main seeds stored are local varieties of sorghum, maize and pearl millet. They use traditional seed storage methods - woven baskets, earthen pots, and buckets made of cow dung and wood ash. How do these compare with seed storage containers where you live?

Source: Farm Radio

What are the steps involved?

These are the steps involved in making a community seed bank:

- Organise a group of workers
- Collect seed including tubers and cuttings
- Clean and dry the seed
- Keep important information about the seeds (eg. varieties, season for planting)
- Store the seed
- Plant out the seed
- Restock seed supplies
- Hold a seed fair where farmers exchange seeds and information

For technical advice on each of these steps, consult the OUTREACH/TVE Preserving Genetic Diversity pack, available from OUTREACH. If the community where you live would benefit from a community seed bank, a local agricultural office or community organisation will also be able to provide further information. Seed fairs are an opportunity for farmers and seed bank workers to share the results of their work.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

CONTACTS

Seeds of Survival (SoS) program, USC CANADA – www.usc-canada.org
Practical Action (formerly known as ITDG) – www.practicalaction.org

WEBSITES

OUTREACH/TVE Education Pack on Preserving Genetic Diversity available through: www.outreachworldwide.org
Further information on agricultural biodiversity projects in Africa can be found at: www.africanfarmdiversity.net and the SADC Plant Genetic Resources Centre (SPGRC) www.ngb.se/sadc/spgrc.html

BOOKS

Seed to Seed by Suzanne Ashworth available from Seed Savers Exchange, 3076 North Winn Road, Decorah, Iowa 52101, USA - A complete and detailed seed-saving guide for 160 vegetable crops. This would be a valuable book for any team or agricultural development workers where a community seed bank is being established, especially where vegetable crops have recently been introduced.