



Let us conserve and exchange seeds

Celebrating traditional crop diversity of the Nepali lowlands

Photo 1: Members of the Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal at the seed fair in Agyauli, Nawalparasi. The text on their bags reads: *Let us conserve and exchange seeds.* **Credit:** LI-BIRD/G.C. Hem

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Seed fair of the *terai* community seedbanks

On 15 May 2019, about 30 members of 10 community seedbanks from the *terai* (the southern lowland) region of Nepal came together at the Agyauli Community Seedbank in Nawalparasi, to display and exchange seeds of traditional crop varieties and share related crop knowledge (photo 1). They also shared stories about the socio-cultural, religious, spiritual, nutritional and medicinal values of their varieties. A similar seed fair will be organized with the community seedbanks of the hill and mountain areas early in 2020, just prior to the planting season in the hills.

The seed fair was organized by the newly formed national Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal (CSBAN), Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD²) and Bioversity International with the financial support of the Seeds, Soil and Culture Fund, managed by RSF Social Finance and the

New Field Foundation. The seed fair was organized as part of a new initiative to strengthen the organizational capacity of CSBAN and the Nayakrishi Seed Network in Bangladesh by: i) promoting seed exchanges and sharing of knowledge and experiences among community seedbanks and with other (seed) stakeholders;



Photo 2: Celebrating the inauguration of the Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal. **Credit:** Bioversity International/R.Vernooy

ii) giving community seedbanks a stronger voice in national policy making; and iii) building linkages with government and civil society organizations for sustainability.

During the seed fair in Agyauli, community seedbank members celebrated the recent formal registration of CSBAN as a not-for-profit company under Nepali law (photo 2). CSBAN is a novel and unique organization that aims to represent, promote and defend the interests of all community seedbanks in the country (box 1). Organizing seed fairs is one of CSBAN's mechanisms used to achieve its goals.

A seed fair is an activity to i) create awareness about and admire local crop diversity, ii) display crops and varieties from a community or a region (such as the *terai*), iii) exchange seeds and related knowledge, and iv) celebrate farmers' efforts and achievements in agrobiodiversity conservation. Seed fairs are important events that provide farmers with an opportunity to satisfy their demand for new crop and variety diversity. From our research we know that this demand is strong, for several reasons. Some varieties are disappearing from some areas, among others due to the introduction of modern varieties. Some crops and varieties are no longer suitable due to the impact of climate change on agro-ecological conditions. Some varieties, such as aromatic rice, are gaining in popularity due to growing market demand. Farmers are interested in experimenting with new diversity obtained from other areas as a means to diversify their production, increase resilience and generate income.

Box 1. The Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal

Nepal is a pioneer of community seedbanks. A few non-government organizations first initiated them in the 1990s and remain important supporters. Community seedbanks focus on promoting the conservation and sustainable use of traditional varieties, increase access to quality seeds and planting materials of diverse crops and varieties and generate income for members associated with them. By April 2019, there were more than 40 effectively operating community seedbanks, but there has been little coordination and limited sharing of experiences and innovations.

To address this gap, LI-BIRD, Bioversity International and a number of other organizations, with the financial support of the Development Fund of Norway, organized a first national workshop on community seedbanks in 2012 bringing together organizations who support community seedbanks (Shrestha et al. 2013). In 2013, farmers and farmer organizations managing community seedbanks held another workshop to exchange knowledge, seeds, successes and lessons learned. Participants proposed creating a national network of community seedbanks and established an *ad hoc* National Coordination Committee of Community Seedbanks in Nepal. Since then the committee has met regularly.

In May 2018, the 2nd National Community Seedbanks Workshop was held (Joshi et al. 2018). After the workshop, the *ad hoc* committee and some community seedbank leaders met again and decided to formally register the national network as the Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal (CSBAN). Its mission is to maintain and utilize Nepal's rich agricultural biodiversity for human health and well-being. Key functions include: i) promoting and supporting the production and marketing of farmer varieties by community seedbanks; and ii) facilitating access to seed technologies, equipment and tools. CSBAN will also establish a seed database and maintain an on-line seed catalogue of varieties from community seedbanks, which can be accessed by a newly developed Mobile App.

To date, a total of 27 community seedbanks (of 46 active community seedbanks) have joined CSBAN. This is probably the first association of its kind in the world.



Photo 3: Seed fair preparations. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy



Photo 4: Seed fair preparations. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy

Seed fair preparations

It takes considerable time and effort to organise a seed fair (photos 3, 4, 5). Representative samples of the seed diversity conserved by each participating community seedbank need to be selected, checked, and carefully packed, labelled and registered. In some cases, seeds travel long distances, such as from the far western part (e.g. Kanchanpur) of the country (a 12-hour bus ride to Agyauli, Nawalparasi). Before the seed festival begins, a tent is erected, tables are set up and each of the community seedbanks places the varieties for their display into a recyclable bin, plastic bag or bottle. All seed samples have a tag that identifies crop, variety, community seedbank and location of origin. All the bins, bags and bottles are then put on tables in a well-organized manner for display, so that visitors can easily view everything.

While farmers prepare the seed, the LI-BIRD team prepares seed envelopes, labels, staples and

tape, seed registration forms (to document the diversity displayed by each community seedbank) and seed demand forms for any seed exchanges that may occur during the seed fair. The seed demand forms are a novelty. They allow documenting which community seedbank is interested in which varieties and,

once the seed has reached its destination, subsequently tracking the flow of the varieties received. LI-BIRD and Bioversity International will do this research in 2020 to find out how the exchanged seed was used, by whom and how the varieties perform in other locations.



Photo 5: Seed fair preparations. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy



Photo 6: Dr Krishna Kumar Mishra (on the left) admiring the rich crop diversity on display. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy

Seed display and exchange

The 10 community seedbanks displayed an impressive total of 27 crops and 381 varieties, including 211 rice landraces. This rich diversity impressed the special guest of honour, Dr Krishna Kumar Mishra, the new chief of the National Agricultural Genetic Resources Centre, the national genebank, who was the first to go around the tables. In his words: *“I am amazed by the outstanding work of the community seedbanks in the terai. Each of them looks like a small national genebank.”* (photo 6) Community seedbank members were equally impressed as they interacted eagerly with fellow members, and made their demands for seed.

Seed exchanges are regulated by the following rules established by CSBAN: i) exchange is between community seedbanks; ii) seeds

donated and seeds received must be registered by the community seedbank; iii) a portion of the exchanged seeds are conserved in the community seedbank; iv) another portion is tested by members of the community seedbank for adaptability; and v) seed is shared according to demand by community seedbank members. For CSBAN,

these activities are a clear example of exercising their farmers’ rights in the country. Ramekwal Yadav, the newly elected coordinator of CSBAN explained: *“Defending farmers’ rights is an important goal of the association. We want to protect and promote farmer varieties in which the government has little interest.”*

At the end of the morning, the count for seed demands totalled 353 with rice as the number one crop, cow pea second and cucumber third. Some varieties were in very high demand such as *Ghiupuri* rice of Nawalparasi and *Tilki* rice of Dang.

After seed demand had been comprehensively inventoried, community seedbank members prepared seed envelopes containing the requested seed, depending on the available supply. The number of varieties distributed by community seedbanks ranged from 13 to 73, with amounts per variety ranging from 50 to 500 grams (photos 7 and 8).

“The seed fair went very well”, commented one of the farmers reflecting the general sentiment of all participants, *“we exchanged many varieties of many crops, which we will bring to our community seedbank, multiply and then test in our fields.”*



Photo 7: Seed exchanges between community seedbanks. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy



Photo 8: Seed exchanges between community seedbanks. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy

Seeds that give

Community seedbank members dedicated the last part of the festival to storytelling (photo 9). They shared short anecdotes of the socio-cultural, religious, spiritual, medicinal and nutritional qualities of seeds. Such qualities are not well known by ‘outsiders’ such as policymakers or researchers, but for farmers and their communities they are integral elements of family and social life and rural livelihoods. Seeds do not only have an agricultural function as an input for production of food, fibre or other outputs. Seeds also embed immaterial values and serve, through exchanges and offerings, to facilitate relationship building and strengthening of social ties.

Here are some examples of these multiple values of seeds:

“In Agyauli, we conserve Bakulle Anadi rice. It is a sticky rice that we have cultivated for generations. For the indigenous Tharu community, the seeds of this rice are used in the terai and the hills for cultural and religious activities. Bakulle Anadi also has medicinal value.”

“In Bara, we conserve 85 rice varieties in the community seedbank, many of which are used for cultural and religious activities, such as local Sathia rice in ceremonies (e.g. Chhath festival) to worship the gods. Local

Sathia rice that matures in a short period in November is indispensable in wedding ceremonies. But not only rice is important. Pigeon pea, small and large ones, is used during the Chhath festival as a sacred food. We make a special soup which is considered a very precious and expensive dish.”

“In Kailali, Kancharpur and Dang, we cultivate a rare local Tharu potato, which has special taste and preferences. Therefore, we use these potatoes to serve visiting guests and during marriage ceremonies we prepare a special Tharu potato dish...”

“In Shankarpur, Kanchanpur, we have Anadi rice which is used for various food culture practices as well as worshipping the Naga (snake god) by the indigenous Tharu community. It also has medicinal value. For the marriage of daughters, we make a kind of round bread (Sel roti) with Anadi rice. The same bread is used in Maghi and other festivals.”

“In Sunsari and Morang, indigenous hill communities use finger millet to make alcohol to please our guests. It is also used in special ceremonies. Horsegram is used as medicine to get rid of gallstones”.

“In Jhapa, we use barley to worship the gods. And we cultivate a black coloured aromatic rice, Kalo nuniya, which we use for serving guests and also during festivals. It is an essential variety in our local food culture.”

As part of the new initiative, LI-BIRD and Bioversity International will conduct more research to explore these special values of seeds, and collect and publish more stories.

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More about the seed fair can be read in a blog and in a brief:

http://libird.org/app/news/view.aspx?record_id=82

<https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/102366>



Photo 9: Seed storytelling. Credit: Bioversity International/R.Vernooy

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Note

¹ The community seedbanks represented at the seed fair were from: Shivagunj, Jhapa; Charpate, Morang; Kachorwa, Bara; Agyauli, Nawalparasi; Rampur, Dang; Belawa, Bardiya; Mohammadpur, Bardiya; Masuriya, Kailali; Joshipur, Kailali; and Shankarpur, Kanchanpur.

² See <http://www.libird.org/about-us/who-we-are>

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Photo: Seed-festival banner. Credit: Bioversity International/R. Vernooy

Alliance



The Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) delivers research-based solutions that harness agricultural biodiversity and sustainably transform food systems to improve people's lives.

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