

Seeds in Internal Exile: A challenge for small farmers

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Abstract

Diversity in agriculture has diminished over time with an impact on diets and culture in different agro-climatic regions. Historically, farmers have managed many varieties and breeds according to agronomic and culinary properties. Considering the need for a wide gene pool to improve and multiply genetic resources for food and agriculture, breeding requires access to seeds and breeds from the formal and informal sectors. Open-pollinated varieties, which represent an important gene pool for resource-poor farmers living in marginalized and stress-prone areas, are rapidly vanishing. They are replaced by very few hybrid varieties, which require inputs not affordable by poor farmers and which entail dependence on large seed companies and increased quantities of water.

Native varieties suit the needs of quality, nutrition, resistance to droughts, pests, and diseases, and have a demonstrable yield. One popular myth is that there is an imminent need for genetically modified seeds in order to increase yields and provide food for the growing populations. Going back to the green revolution that heralded the high-yielding varieties by displacing the vast diversity that existed, it has been established that despite increased yields and the large networks of public distribution systems, hunger has persisted for one-third of the population.

The role of open-pollinated varieties in organic farming cannot be underestimated and a number of studies show that it is possible to feed the world with organic farming. Green Foundation (GF) has played an important role in conserving the farmer's varieties and has taken the debate beyond the narrow confines of farmers' varieties as low-yielding. Green Foundation's work emanated from the depth of indigenous knowledge and culture. The participatory approach to conservation is not, however, without many bottlenecks. The approach to conservation largely depended on the role that women have played in conserving the diversity on marginal lands and fragile ecosystems. Some of the festivals around seed during sowing and harvest are symbolic of culture and knowledge that go way back in time.

GF, in its interaction with farmers, has encouraged organic cultivation of the farmer's varieties. With the growing threat from the public sector, which provides the certified seeds, and the recent entry of the private sector flooding the market with hybrids, a large percentage of the farmer's varieties have been sent into internal exile. In a country like India, farmer-produced and -exchanged seeds have to a large extent lost ground with the entry of the private sector. If indigenous diversity—which is the bedrock of food security for small and marginal farmers—is to survive, some immediate interventions are essential: empower the farmers to recover lost diversity, improve rural infrastructure, provide facilities for postharvest handling, and mainstream government policy to support sustainable farming, rural livelihoods, nutrition, health, and food security by conserving the threatened biodiversity.