

Farmer managed seed systems in Latin America

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While seed diversity is declining and the monopolization of the seed market is worldwide increasing, farmers in Colombia and Nicaragua are succeeding in preserving and promoting their indigenous seeds. The SWISSAID supported campaign “Semillas de Identidad” boosts agroecological farmer led seed production, sets up community seed banks, connects seed savers in networks, helps farmers to breed new varieties and assures the seed quality using Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). In this way, local smallholder farmers make an important contribution to preserve agrobiodiversity and to adapt their farming systems to climate change. A new publication summarizes the results achieved over many years.



Photo: Luis A. Guzmán

Even though in Colombia and Nicaragua the use of indigenous seeds by farmers is still widespread, the diversity of seed varieties has declined in recent decades. One of the most important strategies to raise farmers' awareness on and engagement for their local seeds, is to identify and connect seed savers with each other. Through the “Campaña Semillas de Identidad” more than 400 seed savers in Colombia and 160 in Nicaragua are involved in building up and strengthening regional seed networks. The seed saver networks aim to preserve, multiply and exchange local seed varieties. Together with the farming families they carry out inventories of the existing seed varieties in the village communities. The physiological and ecological properties of the varieties have been characterized. Knowledge about the varieties, such as taste, storage capacity, production cycle, yield, adaptability to climatic conditions, is collected and made available to farmers. In Nicaragua thanks to “Semillas de Identidad” 135 varieties of maize, 147 varieties of beans, 31 other legume varieties, 39 varieties of millet and sorghum and 16 varieties of rice have been registered and saved from disappearing.

Once the seed saver networks have obtained an overview of the existing varieties, the conservation, propagation, exchange, sale of local varieties and the breeding of new varieties is tackled. The seed saver networks collaborate closely with universities. In Nicaragua for example, over 40 new varieties have been created according to the needs (drought resistance, short maturation time etc.) of smallholder families through participatory breeding. This opens new perspectives for the farmers that engage in breeding activities. With the proceeds of this additional farming activity, the sale of seeds, their livelihoods can be improved.

Together with other organizations, the “Campaña Semillas de Identidad” builds a national seed alliance that advocates for farmer managed seed systems at a political level. Launching petitions or political initiatives, participating in consultation processes are some of the corresponding activities. Media campaigns, including collaboration with supermarkets and restaurants, are carried out so that indigenous varieties are known again and used more widely. At seed fairs organized by farmers and seed savers local varieties are exchanged and agrobiodiversity is promoted.

The seed saver networks group 7000 farmer families in Nicaragua and 3900 in Colombia that do the most important work: the in-situ conservation of the local seeds in community seed banks. This means agroecological seed production, storage, exchange, lending and sale of local seeds varieties. Over 400 community seed banks have been established in Nicaragua by “Semillas de Identidad”. Thanks to their decentralized structure, the community seed banks guarantee the supply for the neighboring farming families and villages with high-quality indigenous seeds. The processes involved in setting up and maintaining seed banks have a positive impact on the communities. Jobs, for example in the coordination and operation of seed banks, can be created and income can be generated. The seed banks keep registers of seed growers and stored varieties, develop guidelines for agroecological seed production and storage, carry out quality controls, such as the measurement of moisture content and germination rate, they treat the seeds with natural methods before storage, label the varieties, support breeding activities of farmers and boost knowledge exchange between them.

Quality issues are often used as an argument to limit the free circulation of indigenous varieties. Seed laws require the certification based on criteria and proceedings that mostly exclude indigenous seeds and smallholder farmers. In Colombia seed saver networks stand up for their right to seeds and have developed therefore their own system to guarantee the quality. They use the instrument of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), an alternative to third party certification, which is affordable for smallholder farmers. PGS are mainly focused on local markets and are based on the active participation of farmers, consumers and other affected actors. “Semillas de Identidad” assesses farmer saved seeds according to jointly defined quality criteria. Various instruments verify that the standards and procedures are followed. The quality of the product can be identified by labels, certificates or contracts.

Seed saver networks and community seed banks in Colombia defined five main criteria, which must be fulfilled by a farmer to get the PGS label:

1. Health, robustness and yield: Seeds must be robust, have a good yield potential and high germination capacity and be free of impurities and damages due to pests and diseases.
2. Origin and adaptation: Seeds shall be of indigenous origin or adapted to local conditions (no seeds protected with intellectual property rights).
3. Reproductive capacity and ecological cultivation: Seeds must be cultivated in agroecological farming systems and be open-pollinated (no hybrids).
4. GMO-free: Seed must be free from contamination through genetically modified seed.
5. Associated to a community seed bank: Seeds must be stored in a community seed bank with corresponding technical support.

PGS allows the farmers to prove that their indigenous seeds are of high quality and satisfy the needs of family farmers and the market.

The “Campaña Semillas de Identidad”, through its seed saver networks and the community seed banks, makes an immense contribution to food sovereignty and the conservation of plant genetic resources – our agrobiodiversity.

Here you can read the whole publication about the work of “Campaña Semillas de Identidad”, supported by SWISSAID:

www.swissaid.ch/en/farmer-managed-seed-system

www.semillasidentidad.blogspot.com

www.semillasdeidentidad.org