

Campaign to Save Traditional Seeds

In India irrigated agriculture and the use of high yielding varieties is strongly supported. This has led to an overproduction of rice and wheat. The Public Distribution System has been selling this subsidised surplus to the poor. As a result, millet had gradually been replaced as a staple food by wheat and rice. Rainfed agriculture in Tamil Nadu has become

Oswald Quintal

strongly marginalised and traditional varieties of small and minor millets and pulses have nearly disappeared. The Tamil Nadu LEISA Network* organised a campaign to 'Save Traditional Seeds' and, in the process, they have documented the traditional varieties that still exist. They have also identified those farmers interested in cultivating, upgrading and multiplying traditional varieties

On the road

A campaign "trail" committee was formed to tour the area. It consisted of members of farmer' associations and consumer forums. A core team was made responsible for addressing public meetings in colleges,

universities and on the street. This team was also responsible for collecting information about the traditional varieties cultivated in the region and for forming village committees to cultivate and upgrade traditional seeds. A cultural team was responsible for street theatre performances that demonstrated the impact of modern agriculture, the threat to biodiversity and the importance of preserving, cultivating and upgrading traditional varieties.

The campaign was opened by the Vice-Chancellor of Anna University, Madras (Chennai) on 10 December 1997 and reached Kannikumari on 10 January 1998 after covering about 1200 km. Every day, during this 30 day period at least one meeting was held at a college or university and 3 to 4 street performances were given. Meetings often attracted between 2000 and 2500 people a day.

Without the solid support of the farmers, who provided food for 150 people 3 times a day; the NGOs, colleges and universities that provided accommodation, and contributions of grain and cash from the general public, the campaign would not have been possible.

All the daily and weekly magazines in Tamil Nadu and the State television service followed the campaign's progress.

Subscriptions to the LEISA Network magazine doubled and some 180 farmers became involved in newly founded community seed conservation committees. The seed committees, in collaboration with the LEISA Network and universities and colleges will use the traditional varieties and the information collected in testing and multiplication experiments. Much information was also collected on traditional agriculture and the loss of biodiversity. This included, for example, inscriptions from a temple wall that indicated that rice yields of 7-9 tons were obtained in traditional rainfed agriculture, thus exploding the myth that the productivity of traditional varieties is low.

Oswald Quintal,

Tamil Nadu LEISA Network, 22, High Ways Colony, Subramaniyapuram, Trichy-620 020, Tamil Nadu, India

* The LEISA Network, founded in 1990, is dedicated to the development of sustainable small-scale rainfed agriculture. Its members are resource-poor farmers and small NGOs living and working in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry in southern India where rainfed agriculture and livestock keeping predominate.

Box 1 Complementarity and sustainability of *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation

Farmers have developed and shaped landraces through repeated seed selection and production. The *in situ* location for these genetic resources is the farm. For this reason, on-farm conservation is a synonym for *in situ* conservation of crop and livestock genetic resources. The on-farm or *in situ*

in situ maintenance of genetic diversity is a conservation strategy that is complementary to *ex situ* conservation in genebanks. The crucial importance of *in situ* conservation lies in the fact that the evolutionary process can continue, whereas the *ex situ* conservation represents a 'frozen and static' situation. Conservationists accept the fact that they cannot conserve all materials and genes *ex situ* because of limited resources and that materials are at risk from power cuts

and delayed regeneration. However, *in situ* conservation is not fully adequate for the maintenance of material or genes (see Sthapit & Jarvis p40). First, because farmers may not wish to continue planting particular varieties or crops if better varieties become available. Second, the genetic make up of materials can change when farmers change production practices. This generates such discussions as whether farmers who maintain farmers' varieties/landraces should be encouraged (or allowed!) to use fertilisers or pesticides. From a 'pure' conservation perspective, this is not desirable. On the other hand, farmers cannot be forced or expected to grow particular farmers' varieties/landraces in the traditional way if they are not compensated for extra costs or yield losses.

The Ethiopian genebank of the Institute of Biodiversity Conservation and Research (IBCR) has adopted a compensation approach, at least in the short term. Some argue this is not a sustainable way of maintaining *in situ* conservation because compensation is only available for the length of the project. However, alternatives are not readily available. If the gene bank waits until policy makers have created a socioeconomic environment that favours the use of local genetic diversity by farmers, then many valuable genes will probably be lost as farmers turn to improved materials or abandon their farms in search of a more promising future.

The justification for the *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation of genetic resources is that resources will be used by farmers either directly or indirectly. Both approaches require policy support. A policy that provides for the creation of a regulatory seed framework and market can significantly contribute to the on-farm use of genetic diversity (see Demissie p30). It is, however, essential that the value and complementarity of *in situ* conservation and the role that farmers play in conserving genetic diversity is recognised.

Conny Almekinders and Abebe Demissie



photo Conny Almekinders