

South Africa implements a national strategy to support community seed banks



Ronnie Vernooy/Bioversity International

Women of the Gumbu village inspect the first seeds brought to the community seed bank.

KEY PARTNERS

Bioversity International and Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, South Africa

YEARS

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RESEARCH FLAGSHIP

Property Rights Regimes for Management of Natural Resources and Assets

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

South Africa

CORRESPONDING RESEARCHER

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Farmers have traditionally maintained local seeds, and through them biodiversity, using indigenous knowledge passed through generations. Farmers select, plant, harvest, clean, and store seeds to feed their families today and in the future. They also exchange and share seeds with their neighbors, friends, and relatives. However, these traditional practices are eroding as a result of increased commercialization of agriculture and, in many areas, urban migration of the younger generation. Heat, drought, and poverty threaten crops, especially in marginal areas important to many smallholder farmers. Due to prolonged periods of drought, many households have lost their stocks of traditional seeds.

In response, South Africa's Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, with technical assistance from Bioversity International provided under the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets, has begun to support community seed banks. The objective is to help local smallholder communities revive and improve their traditional seed-saving practices for the sake of food security, sustainable agriculture, and conservation of the country's agricultural biodiversity.

Key facts

- › Traditional practices of maintaining indigenous biodiversity are in danger as a result of stresses caused by climate change and human activities.
- › South Africa's Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, in collaboration with Bioversity International, implements a national community seed bank strategy to support smallholders in preservation and multiplication practices for seeds of local importance.
- › Women farmers are playing a key role in the management of the pilot community seed banks.

Two pilot community seed banks have been established to date, one in Gumbu village in Limpopo province and one in the town of Sterkspruit, Eastern Cape province. The seed banks are being managed by community members—and women farmers, as active custodians of agricultural biodiversity, are playing a key role. In the coming years, new community seed banks will be established throughout the country, and links will be set up between the community banks and the national gene bank.

The Gumbu village community seed bank is managed and operated by a group of 40 women farmers. They give priority to nutritious crops and good-tasting varieties that are resistant, easy to prepare in traditional dishes, require few inputs, have a short growing cycle, and store well. The women state that the community seed bank allows them to maintain a range of different crop species and varieties inherited from their parents, supply their households with food, and earn some extra cash. They also say that exchange of seeds among farmers from different communities helps to stop the loss of crop diversity that is occurring in the area. Last but not least, managing the community seed bank gives them great satisfaction.

“We are very happy to have our own community seed bank in the village. We will take good care of the seeds. In the last few years we lost several varieties of sorghum. Now we want to bring them back,” says a member of the Gumbu village community seed bank committee.

Thabo Tjikana, curator of South Africa’s national gene bank and co-coordinator of the research, has another reason to be satisfied: *“After all the ground work that we did and the many visits that we made, the community seed bank is now up and running. It represents the first step in the building of a national network of seed savers that will include the national gene bank and community seed banks. That is our vision for the future.”*

“The community seed banks and complementary technical support provided by the South African government will allow farmers to improve seed conservation technologies, increase access to crop diversity, apply crop improvement practices, and explore seed production and marketing opportunities. The next steps are to scale out the pilot experiences of Gumbu and Sterkspruit to other smallholder farming areas through a process of awareness raising, capacity building, and farmer-to-farmer exchanges,” says Ronnie Vernooy, project leader, Bioversity International.

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Lessons learned

- › Community seed banks are important components of collective seed-saving, exchange, and multiplication practices.
- › Key elements for the establishment and effective operation of a community seed bank are farmer motivation and farmer-led organizations, availability of long-term technical support, opportunities for farmer-to-farmer learning, and supportive policy and legal measures.
- › In many communities, women are the custodians of seeds. They can be community seed bank leaders and champions.

Related research outputs

- › Vernooy, R., B. Sthapit, T. Tjikana, A. Dibiloane, N. Maluleke, and T. Mukoma. 2013. [Embracing Diversity: Inputs for a Strategy to Support Community Seedbanks in South Africa’s Smallholder Farming Areas](#). Bioversity International.
- › Maluleke, N., P. Moila, G. Phora, A. Dibiloane, R. Vernooy, and B. Sthapit. 2015. [Savouring Diversity: First Steps in Implementing a Strategy to Support Community Seedbanks in South Africa’s Smallholder Farming Areas](#). Bioversity International.
- › Vernooy, R., T. Tjikana, A. Dibiloane, N. L. Maluleke, P. Moila, G. Phora, and B. Sthapit. 2015. [Mobilizing Diversity: Establishment of the First Two Community Seedbanks in South Africa’s Smallholder Farming Areas](#). Bioversity International.
- › Vernooy, R., P. Shrestha, and B. Sthapit, eds. 2015. [Community Seed Banks: Origins, Evolution and Prospects](#). New York: Routledge.

Further reading

- › [“Community Seed Banks. Seed Conservation: Safeguarding the Inheritance for Our Children.”](#) 2013. Booklet. Pretoria, South Africa: Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF).

Community seed banks are also mentioned in:

- › [Strategic Plan 2015/2016 to 2019/2020](#). Pretoria, South Africa: Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF).

Blog stories:

- › [Powerful Crops: Empowering Farmers through Community Seed Banks in South Africa](#)
- › [Seed Savers of Gumbu](#)
- › [The Women’s Seedbank](#)
- › [Community Seed Banks: Platform for Crop Conservation and Improvement](#)