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Seeking an alliance between farmers and genebanks



Don Victor maintains 39 varieties of native potato
© Paul Bordon/PAR

In Bolivia and Malaysia, farmers are increasingly affected by drought, water logging and unpredictable weather patterns. To cope, they plant an array of traditional crops and varieties to spread the risk of crop loss, whether from pests, diseases or the weather. However for these farmers, agrobiodiversity is not just a way to insure against crop losses; it's an important source of cultural pride and value. Seventy three year old Don Victor, who farms at 4,100 metres above sea level in Colomi, Bolivia, maintains 39 varieties of native potato. "These are like my family," he says, sharing his planting material only with those he trusts.

With the growing impact of climate change, however, traditional varieties and land management practices may no longer suffice. Farmers also need access to varieties that can resist new threats and boost resilience in their farming systems. Hence, the Platform for Agrobiodiversity Research (PAR) has been working in the Bolivian Andes and in Sarawak,

Malaysia, to improve the supply, exchange and conservation of traditional and improved planting material by building greater collaboration between communities and local genebanks. The aim is to support farmers' agrobiodiversity resources, knowledge and management practices in order to find solutions that are appropriate, affordable and sustainable.

Communication, participation and equity

With support from The Christensen Fund, the project began by building a formal alliance between farmers and genebanks through a free prior and informed consent (FPIC) agreement developed with each community. Each agreement outlined clear working arrangements for the gathering and distribution of genetic material (seed), along with rights and protections regarding the use or sharing of traditional knowledge, practices and innovations.

The agreements led to relationship-building and greater equity among farmers, genebank researchers, seed producers and other scientists, spurring information sharing and innovation. Farmers identified the crop traits they needed to cope with shifting climate trends. They also shared

methods they employed to adapt to changing climate pressures.

Community surveys, seed fairs and participatory varietal selection led to a greater awareness of the wealth of plants and strategies maintained by farmers. Simple participatory exercises also helped to identify which varieties were most at risk of disappearing and where conservation efforts



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should be directed.

Conserving diversity

In Bolivia, an important aspect of the initiative was to strengthen relations between potato farmers and seed producers. Warming temperatures had caused seed producers to move their plots to higher, colder altitudes to evade encroaching pests and disease, creating a greater physical distance from farmers and contributing to a decline in trust. By increasing contact and communication among farmers, seed producers and genebank researchers, the project was able to restore trust and build a more robust seed system. The genebank provided improved planting material to seed producers, boosting the availability of quality, resistant and high-yielding potato seed. It also supported the exchange of improved and traditional varieties of native potatoes.

In the Sarawak communities, seed exchange is practised only through family lineages or for special occasions, such as weddings. Community-scale collaboration is not acceptable, as villagers do not want to be compared with one another. Farmers proposed alternative solutions including varietal selection at household - rather than community - level. They also recommended that the formal genebank could provide a 'hotel service' for their traditional rice varieties, allowing farmers to preserve their planting material without having to engage in seed exchange. On seeing how their seeds were stored in the air-conditioned facilities, farmers in Sarawak expressed that while they had no money in the bank, it was a consolation to know that they owned something "even more precious than money in the genebank."

Building trust



Greater collaboration between communities and local genebanks has been created in Sarawak
© Paul Bordon/PAR

In both countries, scientists realised that they needed to change the way they viewed seed exchange. In these communities, it is not merely a means for geneflow within the farming system, but also a type of intellectual property right to be protected. But improving access to agrobiodiversity remains a major challenge. Farmers' needs must be fully included in research and development designs or innovation will not be adopted. Safe spaces where community members can express themselves are required if effective and efficient interaction between formal and informal knowledge and seed systems is to take place.

"Any project needs to start off with agreement," explains Paul Bordon of the Platform for Agrobiodiversity Research. "This way of operating allows trust-building and reciprocity; partnerships can only function when everyone is on an equal footing. Agreeing on the work to be carried out through an FPIC represents a fundamental element in this direction and is a stepping stone towards a more respectful way of operating."

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