



CASE STUDY 2019

Farmers inspiring farmers to save seeds in Kenya

Summary

Food insecurity and reduced food sovereignty is rampant in Kenya. This can be attributed to a new era of industrial agriculture resulting in genetic erosion of local crops, monoculture, high seed prices, and excessive use of chemicals. As a remedy, Kenya Seed Savers Network empowers farming communities to develop a Community Biodiversity Register and adopt on-farm seed saving through community seed banking. Members organize seed fairs to exchange, share and sell their seeds. Farmers from other regions are connected to the Seed Saver groups via a database with details of the 35,000 local seed growers.

The Problem

“Each drought cycle affects farmers most, and every intervention to food shortage brings with it the indignity of having to queue for food rations,” says Francis, a farmer in Makongo village, when asked his motivation to get involved in seed saving.

Local crop seeds that could help farmers survive drought periods are not found in the agro shops. In the traditional days before interference in agriculture by industrial farming technologies, farmers had a diversity of crops which could survive the droughts. Crops like yams, cassava, sweet potatoes and some varieties of millet and sorghum could not disappear just because of a few months of drought.

Food sovereignty is tied to seed sovereignty; they go hand in hand. People cannot feed themselves without seed freedom; and the seed policy environment should not constrain them.

Soils were fertile because they were always covered with fruits trees and other perennials. Monoculture and growing for the markets has to be blamed for exposing small scale farmers to hunger and the indignity of surviving on relief food.

Seed laws criminalize farmers' seeds and the old culture of seed saving and sharing. Gaps in supply of seeds of local crops, which would have been filled by local farmers in the villages, remain open because it is illegal for farmers to sell seeds. Kenyan seeds laws are the most punitive to the farmers in the region because there are based on UPOV 91 whose main agenda is to promote the commercial seed sector through intellectual property rights. The Kenyan Seed and Plant Varieties Act allows breeders to register and secure Plant Breeders Rights if they discover any new variety. Breeders, especially in public agricultural research institutions, have been "discovering" and privatizing farmer's varieties. This practice is commonly known as bio-piracy.

Kenya Seed Policy recognizes that the bulk of seeds grown by farmers comes from the farmer managed seed system, but provides no strategy to strengthen it. Failure by the government to act on farmer managed seed systems has limited farmers' access to seed due to high seed prices and the lack of commercial supply of seeds of local crop varieties.

Almost all the seeds used to grow vegetables are imported by seed companies which repackage and distribute in the local markets. Apart from destroying local diversity, foreign varieties need fertilizers, fungicides and pesticides to perform in this environment, resulting in increased disease and poisoning of the farmers in addition to environmental degradation and soil destruction.

Each drought cycle affects farmers most, and every intervention to food shortage brings with it the indignity of having to queue for food rations.



Jane Wanja shows germination test

In the development of the community biodiversity register, focus group discussions showed that we have lost more than 30 cultivars of local crops in just ten villages over the last 20 years.

The situation called for action in creating awareness, mobilizing and inspiring farmers to change.

The Solution

Seed Savers Network's first objective is mobilizing farmers to inspire them to bring back indigenous knowledge on seed saving and conservation of biodiversity. This involves identifying senior farmers who still use traditional knowledge and local varieties. These champion farmers are motivated to share their knowledge and experience with other farmers. Farmers' groups are trained in both positive and negative seed selection methods to continuously improve existing farmers' varieties. Each group starts a seed bank at the end of the growing period.

The second objective is to improve the supply of seeds in the villages, targeting those that lack supply such as fruit tree seedlings, cassava cuttings, sweet potato vines, arrowroots and other local vegetables. Farmers are mobilised to join seed banks and maintain quality of these crops, supplying other farmers whenever they are needed. For vegetatively propagated crops, these custodian farmers serve as seed suppliers and are entered into a database that helps in connecting supply to demand.

“ We have lost more than 30 cultivars of local crops in just ten villages over the last 20 years. ”

Seed Savers Network organizes a Training of Trainers course each year to share knowledge and experience on various aspects of farmer based seed systems. Staff working with farmers are trained on seed sovereignty, seed laws and policies, seed production and seed processing.

To reach out to others, seed fairs are organised where farmers share, exchange and sell seeds. Stakeholders from both public and private sector are invited.

To create digital evidence, Seed Savers Network documents local varieties using a community biodiversity register. The process also documents indigenous knowledge associated with conservation and utilization of the local varieties. To reach a wider public, we use social media and farmers' programs on local radio stations.

Results

Seed Savers Network has established seed banks in 40 villages through a model where seed bank members identify one trusted member with space to keep seeds produced by all of them. Seeds stored in the seed bank belong to individual members and normally provide enough seeds to plant in the next season, to sell to other non-member farmers in the village, and to exchange during seed fairs. About 10% of the seeds are always maintained in the seed bank to provide security just in case the planted crop doesn't perform due to challenges with the weather. Each seed bank holds an annual seed fair in the village to sell seeds and promote conservation and utilization of local varieties

Network members are spreading the message of food sovereignty, food safety and environmental conservation in agriculture. This message is spread through all kinds of gathering, including churches and funerals, generating new seed banks started by the local farmers themselves.

There are already more than 35,000 farmers in our database who conserve different local crop seeds for supply to other farmers as needed. The excel database, with farmers' location and type of crop



Beatrice Wangui

cultivars they are conserving, helps us connect demand with supply whenever there is a request.

We have also developed a curriculum for training that we are using to train other organizations' staff on farmer managed seed systems.

Our advocacy approach through interaction with government agents has created goodwill. For example, we have formed a vetting committee for documentation of local varieties to safeguard them from bio-piracy. The Nakuru County committee includes members from the regulatory authority, the state university, the local government department of agriculture and the national gene bank. The committee meets quarterly to discuss local varieties that have been documented by seed savers.

Conclusions

Seed laws and policies are a big challenge to food sovereignty and a bottleneck to advancement of seed saving, exchange, sharing and selling practices within farmer managed seed systems. Today, these practices are happening in an environment of fear as the law criminalises them. Even worse is the law that allows for privatisation (bio-piracy) of farmers' varieties by breeders and seed companies.

Creating a movement of enthusiastic seed savers who advocate for farmer managed seed systems at local, regional and global level is possible through media campaigns and grassroots activities.

What more can be done?

Seed laws and policies neither support nor recognise farmer managed seed systems. Some regulations contravene farmers' rights of ownership of seed varieties as provided by the constitution.

Judicial process to seek interpretation where laws are conflicting with the constitution could create sanity in the seed sector.

Creating awareness for the formation of a movement that includes farmers and consumers can strengthen food sovereignty. This will also promote healthy eating habits and create a market for local non-industrial food. Supporting grassroots farmers' organizations will help in advocacy and lobbying for more friendly legal provisions at national, regional and international levels.

Documentation of local varieties should be done on a wider scale where varieties at risk of extinction could be conserved through linkages with national gene banks. Capacity building will strengthen communities' indigenous knowledge on conservation and use of seeds and crops.



Women show their seeds in a seed fair

“Since I met the seed savers network my life changed, stress reduced completely. This season I only walked to the seed bank to collect my very own seeds (yes my seeds - I know them); I didn't go to the shop to buy. I saved seed, time and money. The only time I bought seeds was during the seed fair from my fellow farmers to increase diversity on my farm. This makes my family and I feel good.” **Beatrice Wangui, a farmer from Langalanga.**

“My family nether lack food even when we have drought because I grow several drought tolerant crops all the time on my 2-acre land. I never lack cassava, sweet potatoes and yam in my field.”
Jane Wanja, farmer and chairlady of Wiruteri SHG in Kasambara



TOT Training of trainers in progress

Acknowledgements

Author: Daniel Wanjama, Coordinator, Seed Savers Network, Kenya

Email: wanjama@seedsaverskenya.org

Web: <https://seedsaverskenya.org>

Who is AFSA?

AFSA brings small-scale food producers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, farmers' networks, faith groups, consumer associations, youth associations, civil societies and activists from across the continent of Africa to create a united and louder voice for food sovereignty.

For more information and more African case studies see our website <https://afsafrika.org>

AFSA encourages the use and reproduction of this case study for non-commercial use provided that appropriate acknowledgment of the source is given.