A level up: Community seed banks in Nepal join forces

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The Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal, with its vision of maintaining and harnessing Nepal’s rich agricultural biodiversity for human health and well-being, is probably the first such association anywhere in the world.

More than seed: Multiple functions of community seed banks

Community seed banks in Nepal have a long and rich history spanning more than 25 years. There are over 40 community seed banks in the country, whose core function is to maintain seeds for local use, but many have other functions. A community seed bank cannot be registered as an independent legal entity in the country, but organized farmers can set up a civil society organization or a cooperative under which the community seed bank can be “housed.” This gives the farmers a certain degree of organizational power. The community seed banks can function as a nodal institution at the community level. They provide multiple services including: i) involvement in community development activities; ii) supply to a large number of farmers quality seeds and planting materials of traditional varieties and farmer-preferred improved varieties; iii) credit facility to implement income-generating activities; iv) management of source seed for seed production; v) bridging of local government and extension agencies to farmers; and vi) technical support. With technical and facilitation support from various organizations, participatory plant breeding, in which farmers and plant breeders work together, is becoming an integral part of the community seed banks in Nepal. Women play key roles in the management and activities of the community seed banks. They raise awareness, mobilize farmers and organize meetings and fairs.
“The people had forgotten about many local varieties but thanks to our community seed banks, these seeds are available once again. People have learned the importance of cultivating these varieties. Knowledge and skills of seed production and seed handling have been increased and practices such as vermicompost and farmyard manure improvement technologies, which use less chemicals, have been promoted, leading to producing healthier food. The income of women and marginal farm families has increased and employment for youth has also been generated.”

Naramaya Karki, a member of the Shivagunj Community Seed Bank.

Despite several challenges, such as securing sustainability of the community seed banks, the journey continues with much optimism. 23 functional community seed banks have recently come together and formed a national association to become stronger and more effective in their work through learning, sharing and supporting each other beyond the community level.

The Association: A first of its kind

Support for community seed banks in Nepal has been provided over the years by many organizations, including Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD), USC-Canada (recently renamed SeedChange), Development Fund of Norway and Bioversity International. At a key national workshop of community seed banks, in 2013, in Kachorwa, Bara, an ad hoc national committee was formed to improve coordination among the community seed banks, facilitate exchange of seeds and planting materials at a national level and improve collaboration with national and international agencies. In a second workshop, in 2018, the committee was reformed and renamed as the national Community Seed Banks Association of Nepal (CSBAN). Then, in August 2019, it was legally registered. Other legal formalities, such as, getting a Permanent Account Number from the Inland Revenue Department, opening a bank account and enlisting in the system of the local government have also been completed.

Agyauli Community Seed Bank in Nawalparasi district, located centrally in the country, acts as the Association’s Secretariat. It has a meeting room and other basic facilities.

CSBAN has developed a strategy for the coming five years based on their vision to maintain and harness Nepal’s rich agricultural biodiversity for human health and well-being, representing, promoting and defending the interests of all community seed banks in the country. While the Association is taking shape institutionally, it has already initiated many activities and raised awareness among the general public. Key functions include: i) promoting and supporting the production and marketing of farmers’ varieties and ii) facilitating access to seed technologies, equipment and tools. CSBAN has also established a seed database and maintains an on-line catalogue of varieties available from community seed banks. This is probably the first such association anywhere in the world. In 2019, the Association also organized a trip to community seed banks in Bangladesh. Inspired by the efforts of UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative, Bangladesh; see UBINIG 2018, for more information), a member representing Purkot community seed bank has taken the lead to start a ‘Kosheji Ghar’, literally a gift shop of popular local food items produced using local varieties, in collaboration with the municipality and agricultural extension agency. The community seed bank aims to eventually produce branded food items. CSBAN will promote and support this initiative to add value to local crop diversity.

“The Association has a big role to play and a long way to go to achieve its goal. We need to work hard to strengthen the capacity of community seed banks, scale up, register local varieties in the name of community seed banks, and ensure farmers’ rights to seeds.”

Sitaram Bajgain, Association member.
In 2019, the Association developed a novel mobile app ‘Hamro Biu’, literally ‘Our Seed’ in Nepali. The app is an online seed catalogue or digital inventory of the local crop varieties and related information conserved and promoted by the Association members. As at the end of 2019, the member community seed banks have conserved 1,620 varieties of 75 species. The app lists all member community seed banks, their crops, local varieties conserved and promoted and a short description of the variety with a photograph and member contact details. This allows interested farmers, gardeners, custodians and other community seed banks, who have access to the internet, to communicate with the relevant contact and request seeds and planting materials instantly. As of February 2020, the app contains information and photographs of 704 local varieties collected from 12 community seed banks ranging from 24 to 129 varieties per community seed bank. The app can be downloaded from the ‘Google Play Store’ (Android system). This is a unique tool in terms of promoting conservation, use and dissemination of knowledge and information about the local varieties.

**Popularizing local seed: Facilitating seed exchange**

As part of a new initiative to strengthen the organizational capacity of CSBAN and to demonstrate the rich heritage and key value contained within local seeds, two national-level seed fairs or seed exchange festivals have been organized. The first one was in May 2019 at the Agyauli Community Seed Bank, Nawalparasi, targeting participation and exchange of seeds and planting materials among terai-based community seed banks (see Pudasaini and Shrestha 2019; Vernooy et al. 2019). A second fair was organized in February 2020, just prior to the planting seasons, at Purkot.
Community Seed Bank, Tanahun, among the hill and mountain-based community seed banks. At the latter fair, 12 community seed banks exchanged 196 samples of seeds; each community seed bank borrowing 2 to 62 seed samples. Exchange of seeds and planting materials among community seed banks is not new but such a large-scale organized exchange of seeds and information among Nepali community seed banks had never happened before. The Association will monitor the use and effectiveness of varieties exchanged at the seed fairs and continue such exchanges at events organized by the members.

Assessing community seed banks: Star rating system

With support from LI-BIRD, CSBAN has developed and piloted a novel method to categorize community seed banks using a five-star classification system, which aims to value, reward and encourage community seed banks to develop their capacities. Standard rating criteria has been developed including: i) the number of local varieties conserved, ii) the quantity of seed produced annually, iii) governance structure and iv) the number of farmers accessing seed. Of 23 community seed banks that were assessed, five did not get any star as most of them had recently started, six community seed banks got one star, seven got two stars and three got three stars. The latter community seed banks are Shivaguj Community Seed Bank, Jhapa; Kachorwa Community Seed Bank, Bara and Agyauli Community Seed Bank, Nawalparasi. Based on the decision of the board of CSBAN, these three community seed banks have been awarded with 100,000 Nepalese rupees each (approximately US$1,000). CSBAN plans to assess and reward community seed banks on an annual basis.

“This [star classification] is a great initiative. All community seed banks are not at the same stage of development. This needs to be understood by all and plans developed to progress following the path of the pioneering seed banks. The classification and award system have helped us to plan and move further as we just got three stars and we can aim to get four or five stars.”

Dilli Paudel, chairperson of the Shivaguj Community Seed Bank.

The award money has been used for digital devices such as a computer, printer and photocopy machine to make day-to-day work more efficient, to digitalize the data and information of local varieties conserved and for keeping of accounts. This classification method shows members the path to progress to a better-managed community seed bank to deliver quality services and encourages them to move ahead.

Recognition from the formal system

With a growing realization among local and provincial governments of the importance of community seed banks, CSBAN is receiving national recognition and increased resources are being allocated to strengthen community seed banks to promote conservation and use of agricultural biodiversity. This is based on the complementary functionality of community seed banks, which, together with the national genebank, could constitute a national crop conservation system.

“The extension agency is paying more attention to community seed banks; they have allocated resources for promoting local varieties and establishing a diversity block [a field in which multiple varieties are grown of a single crop to create awareness about the importance of crop diversity] for our community seed bank.”

Sitaram Bajgain, a member of the Purkot Community Seed Bank.

One of the seed exchange events was attended by Dr. Krishna Kumar Mishra, chief of the National Genebank, and another by Mr. Ram Bahadur Gurung, Gandaki Provincial Member of Parliament. Both guests were highly impressed with the work...
done by the community seed banks and expressed their commitment to providing support.

“The contribution of community seed banks for conserving local varieties cannot be compared with any other work; agriculture research will be incomplete if we do not have local varieties. I would like to work closely with the Association from this point onward, as a representative of the Government of Nepal and chief of the National Genebank. I will include community seed banks as a long-term activity under the Genebank and allocate resources to the extent possible.”

Dr. Krishna Kumar Mishra, chief of the National Genebank.

The National Genebank has fulfilled its commitment by adding a new activity ‘providing technical support to the community seed banks’ in the Nepal Agriculture Research Council’s annual programme of work. This is a welcome new development recognizing the importance of community seed banks in the conservation and use of agricultural biodiversity.

The road ahead
The Association wishes to further expand its activities to promote on-farm management of agricultural biodiversity. There are very few organizations in Nepal working on, and none specializing in or dedicated to, on-farm conservation. So far, related research and development work is largely funded with support from external agencies. This presents an opportunity for CSBAN, with initial support from these external agencies, to investigate the market potential of food items produced using local varieties. Setting aside some of the profit generated from the business would further promote the conservation and use of local varieties and provide an opportunity to develop a sustainable self-financing mechanism. Joining forces has raised these Nepali community seed banks to a new level and it is hoped that their experience will inspire other community seed banks to create national networks that contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture around the world.

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References and reading resources
UBINIG. 2018. Bangladesh: The importance of farmers’ seed systems and the roles of Community Seed Wealth Centers. UBINIG, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Bioversity International, Rome, Italy. http://hdl.handle.net/10568/97159


Photo 6: Participants of the training on data management for community seed banks, 19-21 January 2020, Pokhara, Nepal. Credit: LI-BIRD/H.GC.