

Access to Seeds Forum

Hanoi, 6 August 2016



Access to Seeds
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DRAFT REPORT



Introduction

Farmers' organizations from seven countries in South and Southeast Asia met on Saturday 6 August in Hanoi to discuss challenges farmers in the region face to access quality seeds. Participants started off with a presentation of each country's characteristics and specific challenges. In the subsequent workshop input was provided for the Regional Access to Seeds Index that will assess the performance of regional seed companies in improving access to quality seeds.

The forum was organized by the Vietnam Farmers Union (VNFU), AsiaDHRRA, the Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA) in cooperation with the Access to Seeds Foundation.

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A. Central topics in country presentations

Farmers' organizations from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, The Philippines and Indonesia presented challenges with regard to access to seeds in their countries and activities the organizations have undertaken to tackle these.

Costs

Most country presentations dealt with access to rice seed, as rice is the main staple crop in the region. As an example, 80% of the population in Cambodia is active in farming. Most select and save their seeds in a traditional way simply because it is cheaper. Not only because of the costs of purchasing but also the use of purchased seeds from companies is costlier, as these improved varieties generally require more other inputs such as water and fertilizer. As selection and storage of seeds requires expertise most seed saving and production is done in farmers' groups while individual farmers tend to buy their seeds from shops, the representative of Cambodia stated.

Loss of diversity

But not only costs are a reason why these organizations appreciate seed saving by farmers themselves. As a presenter of the Philippines showed, companies tend to market a limited amount of seed varieties, compared to the amount of varieties made available by the farmers' system. Future reliance on a small amount of varieties could pose a challenge for climate change resilience. Conservation and use of the varieties currently used by farmers should be a main priority. Changing preferences from farmers results in a loss of diversity in the fields. Losing the mother seeds of local varieties was a risk mentioned by speakers from various countries.

Farmers' rights

There is a huge fear about the impact increased company activity has on farmers' rights. Most companies in Cambodia do not produce themselves but buy the seed they sell from farmers, the speaker from Cambodia. Who owns the property rights to those seeds? The speaker from Bangladesh added that farmers have lost rights to save seeds of breed further with seeds they buy from companies. According to a farmer from Indonesia farmers are criminalized by law when producing or reproducing seeds that were bought from companies. A huge complaint was that government regulations seems to favor the interests of companies and lack recognition of farmers' rights and knowledge.

Access to quality seeds

The farmers' organization from India explained it became active in procurement of seeds. Quality was an issue. Not only in terms of fake seed or a low germination rate. Also access to varieties with specific qualities such as organic seed or climate change resilient seeds was a challenge. By working together farmers ensured the availability of the right quality but also timely delivery, availability in remote areas as well as affordability by cutting out costs of dealers and middlemen.

B. Workshop outcomes

Farmers organizations discussed access to seeds in three groups: South Asia, Mekong countries and Island States. Four questions guided the discussion (1) what are access to seeds challenges (2) what are responses (3) the role of farmers' organizations (4) the role of companies.

Access to Seeds Challenges

1. *Quality seeds*: no quality assurance, no compensation when seeds are of poor quality, lack of access to specific qualities (such as organic or stress tolerant seeds)
2. *Accessibility*: Farmers need seeds at the right time, in the right quantities and at the right place. Especially in remote areas this is a challenge
3. *Conservation of traditional varieties*: due to changing preferences of farmers and lack of capacity and expertise to conserve traditional varieties
4. *Knowledge*: farmers need expertise to use improved varieties as it requires specific planting techniques or use of other inputs
5. *Farmers rights*: with an increasing role of private seed companies, farmers feel that their rights are not well protected or are unaware of their rights.

Responses to challenges

1. *Seed governance*: a strong regulation function by the government, with a certification, checking and monitoring system and compensation for seed failure
2. *Capacity building for conservation*: develop community based seed management and seed banks; build partnerships with FO's, governments, research institutes
3. *Capacity building for seed production*: develop seed producer cooperatives, develop seed business capacities.
4. *Advocacy*: protect, respect and fulfill farmers' rights

Role for farmers' organizations

1. *Business support*: Provide inputs for farmers' seed banks and seed businesses such as storage facilities and business financing
2. *Engage in policy dialogue*: build negotiation capacity to engage with governments to protect seed rights of farmers; ensure subsidies from governments
3. *Provide information to farmers*: on seeds, technologies, market information and other knowledge that farmers need to build their business

Role for seed companies

1. *Guarantee quality*: and compensate farmers in case of seed failure
2. *Provide information*: provide complete and proper information on the use of seeds
3. *Benefit sharing*: share benefits of seed sales with farmer for seed conservation
4. *Partner with FO's*: on research and development and distribution.
5. *Transparency*: be transparent and accountable on policies, operations, products,

C. Priorities for the development of the Regional Access to Seeds Index for Asia

The participants of the workshop were requested to give scores to the outcomes that should have the highest priority in the development of the Access to Seeds Index. The scoring resulted in the following three priorities.

1. Importance of farmer of community based seed production and conservation

Seed companies can play an important role in improving access to quality seeds, but also farmers themselves play a crucial role in production and conservation. The Access to Seeds Index should take this into account. Increasing company activity should not restrict the seed activities of farmers. Partnerships between companies and farmers' initiatives, for instance in seed production, could benefit both.

2. Farmer as a business partner

Seed companies serving smallholder farmers should place them central in everything they do. Simply making seed available through shops won't do the job. Farmers need information about the seeds that they buy and use. They want quality assurance (and compensation in case of failure). Pre-provision of seeds and payment after harvest could be creative ways to solve affordability.

3. Strong seed governance

For this to work a strong seed governance, to be developed by governments is a prerequisite. Systems to ensure and monitor quality and certify seeds. But also regulations that not only serve this interest of companies but also respect and protect the rights of farmers.

*Report and impressions from the report by the Access to Seeds Foundation
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D. Photo report



Cambodia delegation



Indonesia delegation



Bangladesh delegation



Nepal delegation



Presentation of outcomes



Phillipines presentation



India presentation



Myanmar delegation



Deliberations in workshop



Scoring priorities