

Farming and food security hub

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Seed banks in south Asia: building grassroots support for crop diversity

Seed banks improve food security and help preserve indigenous farming practices. How can they be better supported by development efforts?

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[Guardian Professional](#), Tuesday 8 April 2014 10.59 BST



Farmers in Pakistan prepare rice seedlings to transplant to more spacious fields.
Photograph: Richard Hanson/Tearfund

While 2014 has been recognised as the [international year of family farming](#), it's important for the [global development](#) community to recognise how useful and important seed banks can be to [food security](#) in developing countries.

The goal of a seed bank is to increase local seed and [food security](#), and contribute to genetic diversity. Seed banks can offer storage facilities for good quality, local seed varieties. They also facilitate seed exchange and seed saving. These collections of seeds are maintained, managed and administered by the local community.

[India](#) has seen over 110 seed banks being established in response to the "recolonisation" of the agriculture sector, where an influx of international seed corporations such as Monsanto and Syngenta are arriving in

India, resulting in a corporate takeover. Vandana Shiva's work at [Navdanya](#) is concerned with biopiracy and [seed freedom](#) (pdf) – the organisation wants to abolish GMO seed varieties, so that farmers can grow comfortably without being constrained by a profit-making cycle of costly and unnatural input.

Another notable example from South Asia is [Oxfam's efforts in Nepal](#) towards the migration of male members of households to India. Oxfam developed community seed banks to empower and support the women in Dadeldurah and Dailekh districts of Nepal, giving them not only a source of livelihood but also a community-based support system.

The [South Asia watch on trade, environment and economics](#) has set up numerous trade platforms and circulated [policy briefings](#) on how to set up seed banks. These include setting up a regional seed bank by facilitating the formation of inter-country partnerships; an increased seed replacement rate to ensure quality; preserving heritage varieties – and, lastly, fair pricing of seed varieties for farmers.

Nonetheless, some have been quicker than others to adopt seed banks at community level, perhaps because seed-saving and swapping is a traditional practice amongst many [farming](#) families. However, we need to realise that indigenous/local ways of farming are under threat; on the precipice of being forgotten or sabotaged by big corporations. And in many cases they need to be updated due to climate change and other anthropogenic phenomenon that directly impact the agriculture sector.

In South Asia, farm-saved seeds and informal exchanges contribute towards [70–90% of the total seed supply](#). Establishing seed banks here is to formalise these channels and ensure the quality of seeds being exchanged are good, local and don't result in a dependency on chemical inputs.

In the last thirty years or so, the agriculture industry has seen a number of changes. A capitalist cloud looms, with big companies striking deals in emerging markets while using [corporate social responsibility](#) to [present their softer credentials](#).

The prevalence of seed banks in [Pakistan](#) has been limited to combat post-disaster rehabilitation efforts. Numerous [aid](#) agencies, such as [Action Aid](#) and Concern Worldwide, saw seed banks as a prompt and effective way to distribute seeds to normalise household conditions after the floods in 2010. However, despite [protests and activism](#), seed banks are still not seen as a long-term solution in that part of the world – primarily due to tenancy farming or feudalism (particularly in the south). The case in India is slightly different as independence from the British in 1947 saw India undergo agrarian reforms and, although the situation is [far from perfect](#), farmers have more control over their land and there is better recognition of farmers' rights.

According to a [recent report](#) from the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, the feudal land ownership system is a brick wall for all development efforts – whether aimed at improving infrastructure, improved water resource management or community mobilisation. This is largely to do with control of peasant population and restricting access to resources and, when combined with poor governance at the national level, means negligible support for the smallholder. A phenomenon that can be observed in the late recognition of the [recent droughts in Tharparkar](#).

It comes down to politics, where community-based efforts go to waste against the even more historic practice of feudalism. According to the [Sustainable Development Policy Institute](#) in Pakistan "there is no national agriculture policy in Pakistan."

Aid agencies need to focus on getting farmers to join and contribute to seed banks but they also need to spend a significant amount of time in dialogue with landowners who manage the lands, supply the seeds and acquire the end product. The dialogue can also supplement and support the infrastructural developments for water availability and irrigation. This is not to say grassroot efforts may go amiss but we must not forget the historical socio-economic issues countries are still entrenched in.