



Seeds or grains: Breaking the dichotomy

Increasingly, seeds are the domain of professional seed breeders, agribusiness and policy makers. They decide what makes a good variety and they establish legislation that excludes other varieties. Despite this, farmer organisations and social movements in Paraíba, Brazil, have managed to strengthen decentralised farmer-driven seed selection and distribution systems and public seed policies. They may well be opening the way for another seed regime.

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Historically, crops have always adjusted to their natural and cultural environments. The outcome is the rich bio-cultural heritage that is agrobiodiversity. This process was disrupted when maximising yields became the major guiding principle in crop improvement. According to the dominant view, modern, agro-industrial technologies are needed to create and maintain the necessary environmental conditions for a crop to realise its full genetic potential.

Seed policy The Brazilian federal government and the state of Paraíba launched several programmes in accordance with this agronomic view, promoting varieties that respond well to intensive agrochemical application. Family farmers were encouraged to replace their wide array of local varieties of e.g. beans, corn, cassava and peanuts with a few so-called “improved” varieties. As these varieties spread, agrobiodiversity declined.

This agricultural approach, or paradigm, was further institutionalised as new regulations defined a “seed”. According to Brazil’s Seed Law, varieties can only be commercialised if they are recognised by research institutes and agricultural commissions in the Ministry of Agriculture, which are strongly influenced by the economic interests of seed breeding companies. The country’s Cultivars Law sets stability, uniformity and homogeneity requirements on seeds in order for them to be registered as protected varieties.

There are various problems with this development. Local varieties carry high genetic variability, which is exactly what makes them so resilient to environmental stress. But these are no longer considered to be “seeds” and are called “grains” instead. In addition, farmers have to use protected varieties in order to benefit from various support programmes, creating another huge disincentive for the use of indigenous varieties.

The seed-grain dichotomy has become an arena of struggle for agro-ecological farming. Agro-ecological production favours the use of ecological capital above external inputs, in which locally adapted varieties play a key role. Also, contrary to the State’s seed policies, agro-ecology supports the creation of an increasingly autonomous agriculture, free from the workings of input markets and the agribusinesses that control them. The Paraíba Semi-arid Articulation (ASA-PB), a coalition of civil society organisations, has challenged this dichotomy by mobilising farmers and movements around “seeds of passion”: local varieties that, in contrast to the seeds distributed by public programmes, are environmentally as well as culturally grounded.

Struggling against invisibility

Practices that use and conserve agrobiodiversity in the Brazilian semi-arid region are an important livelihood strategy for family farmers. Although these practices take place everywhere, they remain largely invisible, deemed “irrelevant” by dominant ideological and economic forces. This is why identifying and enhancing the visibility of these practices was a crucial first step.

ASA-PB started this process in 1996. In collaboration with the local farmers’ union, they carried out a participatory appraisal with farmers to identify local bean varieties in the municipalities of Solânea and Remígio. They found 67 varieties of beans with different characteristics including resistance to droughts and pests, taste and acceptance in the market. They also identified farmer-driven mechanisms that enhance diversity and seed security. For example, farmers store their seeds and exchange them with other families, allowing for the free circulation of genetic material and of the knowledge associated with each variety in the communities. In another example, local church-based organisations established seed banks in

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the drylands of Paraíba in the 1970s. These proved highly effective in times of drought, when crops failed and farmers’ own seed stocks were depleted. The bank lends seeds to the farmers which the farmers return, with a small percentage increase, after the harvest. For the organisations within ASA-PB, understanding these practices was essential for enhancing their visibility and scaling them up.

The local seed banks formed an important entry point for a new seed security system. ASA-PB established the Seeds Network, a knowledge exchange platform on seed practices and agrobiodiversity conservation. This network links 230 seed banks in 61 municipalities, covering 6,500 family farms in Paraíba. During one of the network meetings, Joaquim de Santana, a farmers’ union representative coined the term “seeds of passion”. *“Seeds of passion are those that are good,*



Dialogue with policy makers on the results of research conducted with Embrapa Tabuleiros Costeiros. Photo: Adriana Galvão Freire

that adapt to our reality,” he said. “And people are only passionate about what is significant.”

Seed network politics The Seeds Network formed a space for critical policy analysis and the promotion of alternatives. A drought in 1993 triggered a protest where ASA-PB and other social movements challenged the state’s measures that were based on the notion of “tackling the effects of drought”. ASA-PB and others instead proposed “living with the semi-arid”.

As a response, the national government launched a seed banks policy. The state created its own seed network, which consisted of existing community seed banks, and supported the stocking of these banks. This donation of seeds provided an impetus for communities to construct new seed banks. However, the banks were replenished with conventional rather than local seeds. After the drought of 1998/99, local seed banks were again refilled with conventional seeds, after which new protests followed. ASA-PB persuaded the government of Paraíba to acquire local farmer seeds for the following year. The initiative then stumbled against a legislative barrier: local seeds were not recognised as seeds and therefore could not be distributed officially by the state through the seed bank network. The government bypassed this by acquiring the seeds as “grains”, transferring them to ASA-PB who then distributed them through their seed bank mediators. In 2002 a law in Paraíba enabled direct transfers. When local varieties became formally recognised by the national government in 2003, largely the result of

pressure by the National Articulation for Agro-ecology, the door was opened to more progressive innovations in the government seed programme.

One of the strategies of the Lula da Silva government to eliminate hunger was the Food Acquisition Programme. In 2003, as part of this programme, the government and organisations connected to ASA-PB helped farmers to produce and distribute indigenous varieties that are free from transgenic contamination. Seeds were directly purchased from, and distributed to, farmers.

This experience confirms that local organisations can and should play a leading role in the maintenance of the rich bio-cultural heritage embodied in local varieties. The state can play a supportive role in strengthening collective action by redistributing and regulating the diversity of local varieties, something which is for the common good of agriculture. Despite the successes achieved by the programme in Paraíba and some other states, most government seed programmes continue to be biased towards the conventional paradigm. They argue that improved seeds have been scientifically proven to work under semi-arid conditions and that initiatives such as those by ASA-PB, while desirable, cannot be scaled up to reach all the farmers who are in need of seeds. This has led ASA-PB to recognise the necessity of engaging with science.

Tuning into a different language

To prove that local use, management and conservation practices are effective and viable, the Seed Network

entered into a partnership with Embrapa, the government's most influential agricultural research agency. This helped them gain both acceptance in academia and legitimacy among officials involved in seed programmes.

All of the organisations that are part of the Seed Network were involved in the research that followed, which sought to compare the performance of local and conventional varieties. The research team used participatory methods to determine which varieties to compare, which locations to use for testing and how the interaction between farmers and researchers should be structured. Together with farmers, they identified performance parameters. These included grain quality, plant health, the amount of straw a plant produces, and the effect of intercropping with other crops.

Local varieties outperformed conventional varieties in all regions and in each of the three years that the experiment lasted. Conventional varieties only yielded better in highly fertile soils with plenty of rainfall, which are exceptional conditions for family farmers in semi-arid regions. The varieties that performed best in a certain area usually originate from there. Local varieties were also found to produce more biomass, which is highly valued as animal feed, especially in the erratic climate of the region. Finally, research showed that the seed storage facilities constructed by farmers,

often using only local materials and no pesticides, performed well.

Although the research confirmed what farmers already knew, local practices are now scientifically recognised. Moreover, much was learnt, both content-wise and methodologically, from the interaction between farmers and researchers. This contributed a great deal to the struggle to increase the visibility of "seeds of passion".

So far our experience in Paraíba demonstrates the importance of social mobilisation in enhancing the capacity for collective action in rural communities. It also shows that the state can play an important role in supporting civil society organisations and networks in the construction of seed security systems. Such systems allow family farmers in semi-arid regions to build their own food and nutrition strategies and increase their resilience to climatic change. The struggle may well open the way for another seed regime; one that is grounded in the reality of family farmers.

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Seeds of passion: gaining scientific legitimacy and historical recognition. Photo: AS-PTA

