



Seed fairs in Nampula promote food sovereignty

If you don't save seed, you are not a farmer

In parts of Mozambique, seed fairs have become an important tool for improving family farming and food sovereignty. The concept is simple: create a space for small farmers from different regions to come together to exchange seeds. Gaining access to (diverse) genetic material allows for new opportunities and ideas for reducing risk and increasing productivity on farms. But seed fairs also offer a way to value and strengthen farmers' knowledge and local culture, as well as strengthening farmers' movements. An inspiration to others to set up their own seed fairs!

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In Mozambique, farmers as well as farming organisations are becoming more aware of the strength of their local food production systems, and the fact that these help them reduce risks. At the beginning of this decade, some farmers tried to improve their incomes by participating in cotton and sweet pepper “market outgrower schemes”: they obtained packages of seeds and chemical inputs from extension agents of big companies, who then bought up the harvests at the end of the season. Farmers were paid for their production, minus the cost of inputs. But this

experience left many farmers in debt because of high investment costs, and in the process of specialising in a particular crop, they became vulnerable to an uncertain climate and volatile markets.

Margarita Amisse from Natikiri participated for the third time. She brought groundnuts to the market and returned with sesame, cowpeas and rice. She also bought maize seeds for a neighbour. According to Margarita, the benefit of the fairs is that the seeds are less expensive than in the shops, and the variety is much greater as well.



Photo: Nico Bakker

Many of the farmers who participated in the seed fairs were women.

Real farmer

At the same time, food culture has been changing. Local crops such as cassava and sweet potato, as well as cereals such as sorghum and millet, are being increasingly substituted in the people's diet by crops that are not locally produced, such as potato and wheat.

With these challenges in mind, the Union of Agricultural Cooperatives of Nampula (UGCAN) organised its first seed fair in 2002 in the province of Nampula in northeast Mozambique. UGCAN's objectives were to: 1) create an opportunity for family farmers to exchange genetic material which was adapted to local conditions and customs; 2) promote the diversity of seeds used by farmers; 3) exchange experiences on the production of varieties adapted to local conditions; and 4) make farmers aware of the importance of controlling their own seed.

Since then, membership of UGCAN has grown to 2000 farmers. It was therefore decided in 2008 to replace the single central fair with five simultaneous regional fairs, in order to help farmers participate more easily, closer to home. On average,

about 140 farmer members (of which 40 percent were women) participated in each fair – and 700 members in total. Even more people benefited from the fairs as other, non-member farmers from the areas visited them and brought back materials for their neighbours as well. Practically all of the material (over 95 percent) at the five fairs was exchanged.

Adelaide Mesquita from M'puto participated for the fourth time. She brought groundnuts of the fast-growing Virginia variety and returned with cashew tree seeds and jugo nuts. The variety of cashew she acquired is known for growing fast and for having larger nuts. The jugo nut variety she obtained matures quickly (in two instead of three months). What she likes about the fairs is the diversity and the possibility to recover seeds that are lost when production is low. At the end of the fairs, non-member farmers from the area always come by to try to get seeds too – which can attract new members to the farmers' organisations.

Diversity is growing due to seed fairs

Genetic material is crucial for all agricultural production systems and its management determines to a large extent the food sovereignty of a given community. In principle, all family

Why farmers value seed fairs

- In general, farmers **value the diversity available** at the fairs, which is greater than that in the shops or from local distributors. In Nampula, the fairs offer more and more varieties over the years. Two examples are the supply of 'Virginia' groundnuts as well as the brown-streak-resistant variety of cassava: in the beginning, these were only brought by farmers from a particular area, but in recent years, more farmers from other zones also bring them to the fairs.
- Participating farmers do not look for "high-yielding" varieties but rather seek out **varieties that increase the probability of a yield** (crops that have a short cycle and are early maturing or pest resistant). Fast-maturing crops found at the fairs, such as groundnuts, maize, beans, sorghum, cassava and millet, attract much interest from farmers. This material helps to reduce the four-month wait for staple crops to mature once the rainy season begins, and so reduces the period of food scarcity. Resistance to disease and pests is another important factor – for example, a variety of cassava that is more resistant to brown-streak and certain varieties of millet and sorghum with long and flexible heads, making it difficult for birds to get at them.
- Farmers also value culinary qualities such as shorter cooking time and sweet taste, as in certain varieties of cassava, for example.
- Fairs provide an opportunity to **recover "lost" varieties**. Varieties become lost because of poor production, which obliges the family to eat or sell what they have saved. In Mozambique, this is often the case with maize and groundnuts as they are both cash and food crops and relatively easy to sell in times of crisis. Marupi, a wild cereal traditionally used in porridge, is another example. The reason it appears at the fairs might be that it no longer easily reproduces naturally.
- Farmers are curious and have a drive for innovation, and are therefore eager to **get to know new varieties**.
- Farmers appreciate the **easy access to seeds**. At the Nampula fairs, seed is exchanged or otherwise sold at a symbolic price.
- Seed fairs allow farmers to actively look for and **exchange knowledge regarding seed**.
- Finally, the farmers appreciate having a **space of their own**.

farmers in Mozambique save their seeds because, as they say, "if you don't save seed, you are not a real farmer". Managing seed is, however, a dynamic process. It is normal for farmers to exchange seeds with their neighbours and in this way create small differences in seed stocks between neighbouring farms. Seed fairs give farmers a greater opportunity to increase seed diversity, as they can exchange with colleagues further away.

This is certainly the case in Nampula, as the fairs have come to offer more and more diversity over the years. In 2008, each of the regional fairs had more than 20 different varieties on display, and the following produce was represented:

- Cereals: maize, rice, millet, sorghum, *marupi* (type of wild amaranth grain)
- Beans: cowpeas (*nhemba* and *ecute*), mung beans, fava beans, *jugo* (bambara) nuts, namara beans, pigeon peas, butter beans
- Oils: groundnuts, sesame, local sesame, cashew, castor beans
- Tubers: cassava, sweet potato, yam and local wild tuber
- Vegetables: okra, tomato, garlic, cabbage, chili pepper, local pepper, pumpkin, cucumber, onion, two other types of local vegetable
- Medicinal plants: African potato (*Uapaca kirkiana*), Indian mulberry (*Morinda citrifolia*), neem and two other local medicinal plants (seeds, leaves and/or roots)
- Fruit: watermelon, banana, orange, lemon, pineapple
- Other: sugarcane

Ana Leite from Murrupula participated for the first time and obtained a variety of light-skinned cassava. This variety is not bitter and can be eaten raw, which made it a much sought-after product at the fair. Ana Leite took home maize seeds and a cutting of a kind of sugarcane she had never seen before, so she was also given information on how to cultivate it. For Ana, the fairs offer diversity and an opportunity to discover new varieties.



Sitting under shady trees, farmers display a wide diversity of seeds and other genetic material at one of the seed fairs in Nampula.

How to organise a seed fair

1. Organise the fairs regularly, and avoid the busy time of the growing season. The Nampula fairs are annual and take place about two months before the rainy season.
2. Start with a central fair, but later increase the number of fairs to cover different regions, thus allowing increased participation.
3. Let the regions be responsible for organising their own fair, to allow local farmer leaders to gain experience in organising activities. In the Nampula case, representatives were selected for the different regions, as well as an organisational committee composed of leaders from each area.
4. When organising simultaneous events as UGCAN did, keep the logistics manageable. The five seed fairs catered to members within a 180 km distance from the UGCAN headquarters in Nampula.
5. Move the location of the fairs within the regions every year.
6. State clearly in the invitations that an equal number of women and men are expected to represent each area at every fair.
7. Also explain in the invitations that diversity and a good quantity of seeds are important, as is information about the seeds (when to plant, preferred type of soil, water needs, etc.).
8. Add some local cultural interest: for the Nampula fairs, local authorities were invited, as well as a drum and dance group. UGCAN members were also asked to prepare songs or a play that highlights the importance of seed.
9. Provide money to the organisational committees, which can also be used for food for the participants and guests. At the end of the fair, a breakdown of the costs should be presented to the participants.
10. Ensure that the seed be exchanged or otherwise sold at a symbolic price to keep it accessible to the farmers.
11. Keep out commercial seed companies (authorities inevitably suggest inviting representatives of seed companies, which of course completely negates the idea of the fairs).
12. Award prizes at the end of the fair to the areas that managed to attract the most seeds in terms of diversity and quantity.
13. Afterwards, evaluate the fairs to evaluate possible adaptations for the following year.

At one fair, participants identified three varieties each for maize, groundnuts, cassava, sorghum and rice and two varieties each for fava and *jugo* nuts, sugarcane, pumpkin, sweet potato, and millet.

In addition to the direct aspects of farming, seed fairs offer a way to appreciate and strengthen farmers' knowledge and local culture. They also provide an instrument for farmers to mobilise members, strengthen self-organisation, increase visibility, and show a novel approach for local organisations. ■

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Further reading

The FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) produced a useful handbook in 2006, based on its LINK project (Gender, biodiversity and local knowledge systems for food security) in Tanzania. Following two studies and four seed fairs, FAO prepared simple guidelines for rural communities on how to organise a community diversity seed fair: FAO, 2006. **Community diversity seed fairs in Tanzania: Guidelines for seed fairs.** Report no 51, Rome, Italy. Downloadable at: www.fao.org/sd/dim_pe1/pe1_060701_en.htm