

Farmer groups and the biodiversity dividend

Many different agricultural practices contribute positively in terms of biodiversity. Joining hands and working together is clearly one of them. This was shown by Green Net, the co-op that recently hosted the participants of the Agrobiodiversity@knowledgeD programme in Thailand. There they also saw the benefits that biodiversity can bring to both producers and their organisations.

Michael B. Commons

Since 1993, Green Net Co-operative has been working with small-scale farmer groups under two key principles: organic farming and fair trade. The primary motivation for starting to work together was not our interest in biodiversity, but rather our desire to link farmers applying sustainable ecological practices to consumers interested in having access to quality foods, thus benefiting both sides. Yet, from the start, this linkage has been very positive in terms of local biodiversity. Our work supports the use of integrated ecological practices, contributes to the economic development of farmers and farmers' communities, and has helped to preserve and enrich farm ecologies, and to preserve and enrich farm communities. Most of the Green Net farms show a much greater diversity of life than those managed under a regime of chemical inputs. Farmers adopting organic methods consistently point to the return of species of fish, frogs, wild vegetables and so forth that they had not seen since their childhoods.

We have also seen that working together to produce quality agricultural products that are marketed collectively can help farmers improve their economic well-being. However, the benefit of being part of a farmers' group

and of a network, goes far beyond this. Whether in Thailand or elsewhere, the modern world does not seem to value local, indigenous, and personal knowledge and experience, especially when it has to compete with the knowledge and information coming

Citrus hystrix, the gac fruit (*Momordica cochinchinensis*), *Piper nigrum*, *Piper officinarum*, *Sesbania grandiflora*, various solanum varieties, chilis, wingbeans, *Clitoria ternatea*, and *Boesenbergia rotunda*. A lot to share!
Photo: Sanam Chaikhet Organic Farmers' Group



from academic and official channels. For many years, Green Net members have been using participatory learning methodologies to develop skills in organic methods, and more recently for developing technologies to adapt to climate change. This process enables farmers to share their knowledge and experience with others and to become researchers and innovators themselves. All of our groups have regular village and district level meetings, and we also host an annual Green Net Co-operative meeting. With new confidence in one's knowledge and a spirit of innovation, each meeting is an exchange of knowledge and ideas and, usually, also of seeds and growing materials. New species are integrated onto farms and new ways to use natural resources are learned – and the area's biodiversity wealth increases.

Our biodiverse “rice based-farming systems” While most Green Net farmers are primarily rice farmers, and (organic) rice is the main product the co-operative trades, economic stability, time and an interest in innovation and exchange, have led our farmer members towards more diverse and integrated production. This is in strong contrast with many other farmers in their own and in neighbouring communities, and has led to the successful establishment of many local “green markets” where organic/sustainable farmers sell their local vegetables, home processed foods and snacks, harvested fish, frogs, bamboo worms, mushrooms, rice or vegetable seeds. In other cases, communities apply their traditional knowledge to make special products such as naturally dyed fabrics or basketry handicrafts, and adapt them to tap into interesting new markets. While it may not be evident that this diversified production system comes from groups originally established to produce organic rice, without the existing group dynamics and the market linkages, most of these farmer members would probably not be applying organic methods, and many would probably be supplementing their incomes by selling their labour in cities and factories. They would probably also have lost more of their cultural knowledge and their varietal diversity. They would not have had the marketing, accounting, and management experience they now hold to move forward in new ventures that are founded on their own strengths; their knowledge and the biodiversity they care for.

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“Make every aspect of biodiversity a part of your life”

Forty-three people from all over the world met in Thailand in July for a three day conference as part of the Agrobiodiversity@knowledged programme. Following on from the first meeting in Thika, Kenya, in October 2011, this second meeting was meant to help consolidate the group and kick-start activities. According to M.P. Vasimalai, a participant from India, “the meeting in Thika was like the germination of a seed. This second meeting brought a kind of binding that will only strengthen in the future.” The venue and the set-up of the meeting was special (the green, airy grounds of a Buddhist ashram, surrounded by water and only accessible by a rope raft), but it was the approach which impressed participants most. Quoting the same participant, “the preparatory committee and the facilitator saw to it that the content came from the community, and therefore the ownership lies with the community”.

The three-day discussions helped the group map out ideas and define a strategic direction. Maryleen Micheni, from PELUM Kenya, described the meeting as a “kind of think-tank”. Participants from many civil society organisations together identified five strategic fields of action (policy and government, market and trade, the development of resilient communities, information and networking, and seeds and technology), and then drafted plans to develop with research institutes, governments and the private sector. “The message I take home is that it is very important to understand the interactions between land and resources, local legislation, and the market forces.” “We will go for an agrobiodiversity network on seeds, and set up action programmes. It doesn't need a lot of money to do that. And I intend to target the universities we work with.” “Our intention is to make every aspect of biodiversity a part of our life.”

All these plans are built on the many lessons and ideas that emerged at the meeting. The challenge at home is now “to test the plans we have formulated, interact with others, and further develop our strategies.” The sense of success was summarised by Zimbabwe's Prosper Matondi: “I like the feeling that this is our business. We are in charge.” (Karoline Bias)