

Awudu Ngutte works as a project co-ordinator for INAPA, a small organisation based in Buea, Cameroon. He has been receiving LEISA Magazine since 2004, sharing it with his colleagues and other organisations. He was particularly interested in issue 23.2, “Securing seed supply”, and in the story describing the organisation of community seed banks. He felt that this was an idea that could be replicated in his region. Working together with farmers, extension agents and authorities, he showed that this is possible.



An old seed gives birth to a new one

Awudu Ngutte

Since 2004, when I subscribed to LEISA Magazine, we have been receiving it at the office. We receive it regularly (even though it generally arrives several weeks after publication), and share it among all staff members. Although I have enjoyed all issues, I was particularly struck by volume 23.2. The cover page, showing the head of a family surrounded with a large variety of seeds, caught my attention, as it reminded me of the days when I used to assist my parents, travelling long distances to find seeds. This issue’s title, “Securing seed supply”, seemed especially relevant to the problems we were facing then –and still face– in Cameroon. Reading the different articles, I was happy to come across the one written by Vanaja Ramprasad, entitled “Community seed banks for maintaining genetic diversity”. I immediately felt we could put forward a project to develop seed banks in our region.

The South West region has a farming population of 35 000 persons, yet low production levels and low yields result in food insecurity. Many national and international organisations are busy with projects and programmes aimed at combatting food insecurity. Not many, however, tackle what I saw in this article, and the fact that food sufficiency begins with what is sown. Quoting a popular saying, “whatever is sown will surely be reflected in the harvest”.

Widespread interest

Without much encouragement, this article was read by all of INAPA’s staff

members within one week. Between September 2006 and February 2007 we organised a series of discussion sessions with representatives of the different farmer groups. These included the Unity Farmers group in Bonduma, the Nkongleh Women group in Soppo, the Self Help Union in Dibanda, the ABUET Rural Women group in Great Soppo, and more than 30 individual farmers from within the region. These sessions were used to analyse the major constraints farmers face in relation to seeds, such as: acquiring quality seeds, seed storage, and their preference for traditional indigenous seeds. In all, the discussions gave us a clear picture of the situation. They mentioned that seeds are expensive and hard to obtain, especially in remote

areas such as Mamfe, Munyenge, Lobe, Manyemen, or Bangem. We also looked at related issues, such as labour: farmers rarely work in groups, and they are reluctant to work with extension staff. We regarded the experience described by Ms Ramprasad as an example to follow, and spent some time looking at the opportunities for setting up a community seed bank in our region, following the same approach. We thought it would be useful to involve other organisations, so I contacted Mr Thaddeus Ayuk Etengeneng, the local representative of the National Agricultural Extension Research Programme (NAERP), Mrs Pamela Tarkang, Executive Director of Dynamic Action Group, Bomaka (an NGO working with the underprivileged in



The article which inspired the author; LEISA Magazine, Vol. 23.2, June 2007, “Securing seed supply”.



Photo: INAPA/Therry Photo Studio

The author with Michael Ndah, Peter Ashu and other participants at one of their planning sessions in the building of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Buea.

the rural areas), Mrs Angelina Forcha of ABUET Rural Women, Mr Michael Ndah of AGROPAC-CIG Dibanda, and several extension agents working for NAERP. The outcomes of all these meetings and discussions resulted in a working document called “Seeds for all families”. I drew up an action plan, sketched a project proposal, and presented it to all those involved in the discussions. Since then this document has been my philosophical walking stick.

We then formed a committee involving the different persons and organisations we had been in touch with. This committee immediately started working on identifying the places where the seed banks could be built. Between March and September 2007, this committee was busy supporting individual producers and their farming groups, and selecting high quality seeds and cuttings (which were then to be treated and stored in their respective communities). The committee has also monitored progress, measuring increases in cultivated land and increases in yields and outputs. We have been interested in documenting where seeds come from, and also in comparing the results (such as pest incidence). We have also reported the main difficulties which farmers face. These have included the lack of materials and inputs, the high costs involved in building storage facilities, the presence of rats and rodents in local barns, or the need for training courses and additional extension support. Through this committee, we have also encouraged a farmer-to-farmer exchange of information.

More than a seedbank

In general, results have been positive. The Maize Seeds Producers Union, with 78 members, produced over 100 tonnes

of maize seeds, all of which were sold to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and then distributed to the farmers of the region. The Esimbi Groundnuts Seeds Producers, with 17 members produced more than 20 tonnes of groundnut seeds, most of which were sold through local markets. Other groups were able to produce plantain plantlets, okra and other vegetables. Most groups, however, had difficulties in terms of storage, relying on locally constructed barns. Five groups used rooms in some of their members’ houses. Another issue was the use of sun drying methodologies, for example using bamboo mats. These are issues that require further action, for which the help of the Regional Delegate of Agriculture and Rural Development is currently being sought.

The seed bank project was welcomed by farmers and communities alike. Being a member of the Social Edge Network, a worldwide network focusing on sustainable development, I also wanted to share our work with others, especially thinking of opportunities for new partnerships and new activities. So, I responded to the call made by the Global Social Benefit Incubator (GSBI) programme, organised by the Santa Clara University in California, U.S.A. On the basis of our work and results, I submitted a proposal for the further development of community seed banks in the South West Region of Cameroon. I completed all the necessary forms and qualified as a semi-finalist. I was later glad to hear that I had been selected as a finalist, and was therefore interviewed through the telephone. Although I did not win one of the “action learning” scholarships, I was very happy to have participated, learning a lot in the process.

Now I look forward to the GSBI 2010 competition, while at the same time, together with my colleagues in INAPA, I am busy trying to ensure the sustainability of this approach. Farmer groups will store the best seeds grown in their areas. They should quantify their annual reserves and alert the other communities. Each bank is to have a management committee of 5 persons (bank attendant, statistician, treasurer, adviser and technical staff). Their needs for other seeds shall be presented to the

A community seed bank

As a result of the many advantages of community seed banks, and because of their relative simplicity, they are becoming more popular in the rural areas of many parts of the world. According to Vanaja Ramprasad, “a community seed bank functions very much like a commercial bank. The transfers are, however, not in money but in seeds”. They are generally open to all farmers of a given community, all of whom become members by paying a nominal annual fee. Seeds are then provided free of charge to all those interested in a particular variety or species. The bank’s members then sow these seeds and, after harvesting the crop, return double the amount of seeds initially given. These are then stored and given to other members.

Seed banks do not need special buildings, but they do need to have good storage facilities. An example of a typical seed bank would be an elevated bamboo shed constructed for preserving yam sets.

Other types of seeds can be stored on shelves in tin cans, glass jars, aluminium basins or plastic containers, all properly sealed and labelled. All participants also need to assume specific responsibilities, such as treating the seed before storage. For example, only healthy and pest-free seeds should be selected for storage, and members are responsible for treating them with any insecticides or other treatments. They should also ensure that seeds are thoroughly dried before storage, and are correctly labelled, so that their origin can be traced, for research or documentation purposes.

other banks, and we will try to facilitate the exchange of seeds (limiting monetary transactions to a minimum). One of our future plans is to seek funds for the establishment of Central Seed Bank which, co-ordinated by INAPA, could help all local banks serve their clients. ■

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INAPA, the Institute for Agro Pastoral Activities, works with the farmers of the rural and urban areas of the South West Region of Cameroon. Based in Buea, its main aims are to formulate strategies that will help improve crop and animal yields, involve individual farmers and farming groups in capacity building programmes, and formulate and implement agro pastoral development projects.