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The potentials of developing farmers' seed systems – an example for illustration

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As Ola has pointed out, we call for a bottom-up and demand-driven approach to seed security – to complement the current dominant top-down supply-side approach. Our initiative is aimed at establishing the structures and support required for farmers' seed systems to develop their potentials to meet food security. In this presentation I would like provide you with an example of what this could mean in practice – for illustration.

Ejere - Ethiopia



I will invite you to Ejere in Ethiopia, South of Addis Ababa. An area which used to be part of a centre of diversity of various crops, such as durum wheat, barley and teff. However, after the great famine in the 1980's, Ejere had lost most of its diversity. When farmers were able to resume farming again, they were offered improved varieties, together with chemical fertilizers and pesticides from the agricultural authorities, at almost no costs. The crops performed well and that was a huge relief. But prices on fertilisers went up, and the crops turned out to be less resistant to the environmental challenges in the area. Agriculture was a risky business and hunger was widespread.

A new beginning



Alemu
Tulema



Hailu
Getu

Then farmer Alemu Tulema, a young man back then, received a visit from this man, Hailu Getu, who was working for, then, USC Canada. Hailu Getu had brought a handful of seeds from the National Gene Bank, which Alemu Tulema happily recognised as a local variety. The National gene bank had had an expedition in the area in the 1970s and collected many of the local varieties. These were now safely stored with the gene bank. Then Hailu asked Alemu whether he would like to multiply the seed and grow the variety again, and Alumu was happy to do that. Hailu Getu visited many other farmers with small handfuls of seed, and they all started to multiply and grow the traditional varieties again. Finally, 142 varieties from 15 species had been recovered in Ejere. Much of the diversity was back. To safeguard this diversity, a community seed bank was established: Ejere community seed bank.



This is Ejere Community Seed Bank, which has been facilitated from the organization Ethio-Organic Seed Action, EOSA, in Ethiopia, with support from the Development Fund of Norway, which is in turn supported by Norad. I had the privilege of evaluating the impacts of the community seed bank in 2019.

The community seed bank has 600 member from 8 villages, covering around 20% of the population in the area. The members receive seeds from the community seed bank and pay back in kind with up to 20% interest. This system enables more farmers to participate - and makes it possible to sell seeds to generate income for the operations. The members share and sell seed they grow from the community seed bank freely, thus making it available for local farmers.

Seed storage facility



This is the heart of the community seed bank, where the 142 varieties are stored.

Annual germination tests



Each year all seed accessions are tested for germination

Regeneration, participatory variety selection, multiplication



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And each year, one third of the varieties are grown out on small plots in the experimental field, to regenerate seeds, and to study the performance. Around 40 farmers are invited each year to participate in evaluating the performance together with scientists, using criteria that are jointly developed. The most promising varieties are selected for further development and grown at larger parcels, where participatory varietal selection is applied, and the seeds are finally multiplied for use and distributed among the farmers. It is a really impressive system.

Locally adapted varieties



On this basis 9 enhanced varieties have been developed. Here you can see farmer Ayelu Dinku in her field, with one of them: a red durum wheat variety that is said to be highly nutritious. She claims that it is as high yielding as the improved varieties they get offered, provided you apply organic methods correctly. She also says that this variety is more economically viable for her, since she does not need to buy chemical fertilizers or pesticides for it. She grows improved varieties as well, for sale, but this red durum wheat is for home consumption. For Ayelu Dinku, and her nine children, the improved traditional varieties have greatly enhanced their seed and food security.

Training in organic methods & income generating measures



Capacity building is central to the community seed bank. Farmers in Ejere emphasise that training in organic methods and income generation has been very important as supporting measures, and have contributed to improving their livelihoods.

Improved food security



I found that Ejere community seed bank was an important platform for food security and livelihoods, as well as for self-esteem and empowerment in the area. It has improved the lives of many families in Ejere.

Unfolding the potentials of local seed systems



To enable local seed systems to really unfold their potentials like in Ejere, game change is needed. This implies:

- Enabling legislation
- Supportive policies
- And programmes and projects actively promoting the development of farmers seed systems with all their diversity – and scaling up good models

This is what we call for.

Custodians of agrobiodiversity



Ejere has become a model case, thanks to some great custodians of agrobiodiversity, among others: Ayelu Dinku, Yeshi Ayele and Alemu Tulema. Putting farmers like them at the centre in seed policy, legislation and practice is what we consider crucial to achieve seed and food security.



Thank you for your attention!



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And with these chickpeas from Ejere Community Seed Bank, I thank you for your attention.