

Rural Seed Fairs in Southern Tanzania

Why southern zone rural seed fairs?

The low productivity of agricultural crops is among the factors leading to low income and food insecurity for rural people in the Southern Zone of Tanzania. The use of improved seeds is one way of increasing the productivity of agricultural crops. It was realized that the seed supply pipeline from the seed-producing regions in the Southern Zone was not flowing freely partly due to the poor infrastructure prevailing in the zone. In the conventional Transfer of Technology model (TOT), the seed supply pipeline begins with research where breeding work is done and ends with farmers who access a final product of improved seeds/variety. The Multiple Sources of Innovations Model acknowledges the contribution of informal seed systems. Therefore, it is argued by development experts that informal and formal seed/variety development experts can complement each other and improve the supply of seeds of preferred varieties to farmers better than each expert's isolated efforts.

The Southern Zone Rural seed fairs have the following objectives:

Short-term

- To create awareness of and accessibility to additional alternative seeds and planting materials from research institutions, seed companies and farmers;

- To enable researchers, extension agents and farmers to meet and exchange ideas on their strategies, the skills they use in seed and variety development and to sell and exchange seed materials; and
- To create working contacts between seed expert farmers, extension agents, breeders/researchers and national seed producers. These working contacts could lead to refinement of extension content and the creation of new seed/variety development programs and schemes including more village-based initiatives and researcher-farmer partnerships for technology development

Mid-term

- To increase significantly the number

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and availability of crop varieties bred from National Research Institutes, seed companies and farmers' own seed systems in the southern zone

- To promote farmers' own seed and exchange systems such that the official efforts, in addition to normal commercial channels, also work increasingly towards enhancing indigenous systems; and
- To encourage convergence between official variety development/seed production and farmers in their own complementary seed/variety development

Long-term

- To increase agricultural productivity, food availability and income for rural people in the southern zone.

Organization and implementation of the seed fairs

Over the years 1997–1999, Seed Fairs were organized and implemented by the Agricultural Research Institute (ARI), Naliendele and District Councils with financial support coming largely from the FINIDA-supported Rural Integrated

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Editor: IK Notes
Knowledge and Learning Center
Africa Region, World Bank
1818 H Street, N.W., Room J5-055
Washington, D.C. 20433
E-mail: pmohan@worldbank.org

Project Support (RIPS). However, since the year 2000, District Councils have been financing the rural seed fairs.

Before each seed fair, a farmer seed expert survey is conducted and a seed fair site selected in each district. The farmer seed experts are those farmers who in their community are considered experts on certain crops based on experience and who supply seed to others. These farmers are invited to exhibit during the seed fair day. Other farmers not identified as experts are also free to attend and participate. They could bring seeds, local skills and demonstrate to others. The seed fair sites are selected by districts based on the potential of the area for agricultural production, the availability of accommodation, accessibility and how central it is to other villages so that farmers from the neighbourhood can easily attend the fair.

The ARI Naliendele was being assisted financially by RIPS to purchase improved seeds from different places in the country - particularly from research institutions, seed companies, Tanzania Farmers' Association shops and some hard-to-obtain seeds from farmers. Small samples of 5–200 grams of all seed types of different crops including cereals, legumes, oilseeds, vegetable crops and fruits and tree seeds are collected and packed in small packets. These seed packs are sold to or exchanged with farmers who are interested in testing in their fields.

To spread awareness regarding the seed fair, radio spot announcements are made 2–4 weeks prior to the event and there is live coverage on the actual day.

Farmers in selected villages set up booths for seed exhibition. They also organize traditional dances on the eve of the seed fairs to entertain participants and make the seed fair a lively event. To coordinate the seed fair activity at the village level, various committees are formed, e.g., a building committee (ujenzi), a committee for food (chakula), a committee for traditional dance (utamaduni), and a committee for security (ulinzi na usalama).

District Councils provide extension officers with a budget to attend and participate in the seed fairs. They also provide seed experts with food and transport to and from seed fair sites.

The seed fair lasts for two days in each selected village. District Commissioners are invited to inaugurate the seed fair event. It begins in the evening with traditional dances. And from 7.00 pm to 10.00 pm, farmers are shown video films on various agricultural technologies. The actual seed fair goes on from 8.00 am to 5.00 p.m. after which the seed fair team moves to another selected village in another district. On the seed fair day, apart from the seed exhibition,

demonstrations are held on grafting, farm tool manufacture, etc. Researchers document the knowledge of seed experts through note-taking, photographs and video films. The participation of politicians, researchers, extension, farmers, and private seed entrepreneurs creates working contacts and therefore improves the linkage between stakeholders.

Sustainability of the seed fairs

The Southern Zone Rural Seed Fairs started in 1997 in the three villages of Marambo in Nachingwea, Mbonde in Masasi and Kitangari in Newala Districts. In 1998, the seed fairs were extended to include 9 District Councils of the southern zone and in 1999 they were conducted in 10 District Councils. To sustain the rural seed fairs in the zone, from 2000 District Councils were encouraged, as mentioned earlier, to take the leading role in organizing them without support from RIPS, with the ARI Naliendele playing a coordinating role.

Achievements of the seed fairs

- Increased awareness of improved seeds and accessibility of seeds to farmers. Farmers are now demanding seeds of preferred varieties.
- The Seed Fairs have demonstrated that farmers have valuable local seeds, skills and knowledge that can be documented, disseminated and commercialized.

- Seed Fairs have been a valuable tool of technology transfer from research to farmers.
- Over seventy crop varieties of cereals, legumes, vegetables and oilseeds bred from the formal seed system have been made available to farmers.
- The Seed Fairs have helped to create awareness among researchers and extension regarding local varieties and have helped them to access the local knowledge of crops.
- The Fairs have demonstrated how crops can be protected from genetic erosion; thus, one may recover certain types of seeds which might have been lost in one area/village from other farmers.
- The Seed Fairs have increased the debate on seed issues in the zone and help zonal initiatives on seed multiplication.
- The ARI Naliendele is now linking local individuals, farmer research groups, local institutions to multiply seeds of preferred varieties such as oilseeds.
- Beans cultivation has been introduced in Chilangala Division as an alternative cash/food crop.

The difference between agricultural shows and seed fairs

There have been some questions as to why Rural Seed Fairs should not be combined with the National Nanenane Agricultural shows (an annual event in each district and at National Level) to minimize costs. The reasons are summarized below.

Agricultural shows

- Extension staff influences what is displayed
- Undermines local knowledge and traditional cultures
- Demonstrates achievements from formal research only
- Uniformity is a major concern
- Stresses increased production
- Encourages farmers to adopt best options
- Crops and livestock displayed
- Encourages mono-cropping
- Commercialization leads to genetic erosion
- Some minor crops are neglected
- Is conducted after crop harvest in August
- The major objective is to show formal scientific achievements

Rural Seed Fairs

- Farmers decide what to display
- Promotes local knowledge and traditional culture
- Demonstrates achievements from research and farmers' own seed system
- Diversity of crop plants is a major concern
- Stresses food security
- Monitors availability of seeds of various types
- The emphasis is on seed crops
- Encourages farmers to grow many crops
- Protects crops from genetic erosion
- Minor crops which might have medicinal properties are encouraged to be displayed
- Promotes soil fertility by growing many crops with different nutrient requirements, some of them improving soil fertility
- Is conducted at the onset of the rainy season
- The objective is to improve seed supply bred from research and farmers' own seeds in rural areas.

Understanding these differences is very important because most of the farmers in Tanzania are subsistence, small-scale farmers who may not qualify for the agricultural shows. Subsistence farmers grow various crops for food security. Agricultural shows seems to have been designed for the so-called progressive and commercial farmers. It follows that even the poorest farmers can qualify to participate in Seed Fairs. Rural Seed Fairs encourage the participation of resource-poor farmers in the conservation of plant genetic resources that contributes to their food security and rural livelihoods. This, consequently, empowers the rural poor and builds confidence in their knowledge and in indigenous plant genetic resources.

This article was written by O.K.K. Mponda (Plant Breeder and Principal Investigator, Southern Zone Rural Seed Fairs, ARI Naliendele, Mtwara) and E.M. Kafiriti (Agronomist, Oilseeds Research Programme, ARI Naliendele, Mtwara), Naliendele Agricultural Research Institute, P.O. Box 509 Mtwara, Tanzania, Fax No. 255 023 334023; e-mail NARI@RAHA.COM