



Troubling Tradition, Community, and Self-Reliance: Reframing Expectations for Village Seed Banks

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Summary. — Heralded by both food sovereignty activists and mainstream development practitioners, village seed banks are a rural development phenomenon rapidly gaining attention for their potential to support resilient agricultural systems. This paper presents a case study for examining the power of prevailing narratives of decentralized development to shape and ultimately constrain the operations of village seed banks in Telangana, India. This case demonstrates how visions of tradition, community, and self-reliance can serve to discount the materiality of seeds, the social complexity of village institutions, and even the voices of farmers. The goal of this research is not to criticize village seed banks, as they hold great potential, nor to vilify the narratives in question, but rather to encourage critical reflection on how the assumptions embedded in these narratives shape mechanisms for agricultural development. I argue for a shift away from framing tradition, community, and self-reliance as development solutions and propose an interrogative approach that turns these narratives into questions for engaging more effectively with rural livelihoods.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Seeds are an essential currency for farmers. The promise of harvests to come is bound up tightly in each kernel. Village seed banks, also referred to as community seed banks, are one strategy for supporting rural development through seed systems that has rapidly gained momentum (Vernooy, 2015) among broader calls for both formal and informal seed system strengthening (de Boef, Dempewolf, Byakweli, & Engels, 2010). These village seed banks exemplify several prevailing development narratives: the revitalization of traditional knowledge (Ruiz-Mallén & Corbera, 2013), an emphasis on the village-level as the optimal scale for intervention (Alsop & Kurey, 2005), and the pursuit of local self-reliance (Shuman, 2000). I argue that these same narratives which make village seed banks appealing, may ultimately serve to constrain their effectiveness.

In-depth studies of village seed banks are currently sparse, often conducted by organizations supporting the seed banks, and not surprisingly, heavily weighted toward success stories (Malik, Singh, Singh, Verma, Ameta, & Bisht, 2013; Pionetti, 2011; Shrestha, Vernooy, & Pashupati, 2013; Vernooy, 2015). In addition, the term “community seed bank” is a phrase that unifies a broad range of activities including both those set on conserving diverse farmer varieties and those seeking to ensure availability of modern high-yielding varieties. Most scholarly literature has focused on seed banks conserving agrobiodiversity, increasing access to local varieties, and promoting food and seed sovereignty (Vernooy, Sthapit, Galluzzi, & Shrestha, 2014). *In-situ* agrobiodiversity conservation, whether through community seed banks or informal seed systems, undoubtedly provides an essential resource for agricultural resilience (Mijatović, Van Oudenhoven, Eyzaguirre, & Hodgkin, 2013; Thrupp, 2000). Seed banks championing agrobiodiversity, however, represent just one of several formalized seed bank types. Many seed bank programs with the primary goal of supplying modern varieties at a local level operate under the title community seed bank, village seed bank or seed village. The typology of community seed banks provided by Lewis and Mulvany (1997) describes formalized

banks as falling into four, often overlapping, types; those storing farmer varieties, those multiplying seed from gene banks, those multiplying modern varieties and those providing seed relief. The banks examined in this paper fall into the third, and occasionally fourth, categories. This case study thus provides an unglamorous portrait of understudied seed banks operating in unexpected ways. In doing so it not only fills an existing gap in the understanding of seed banks but moreover highlights the power of prevailing narratives in shaping and constraining action for rural development.

I argue that the narratives of tradition, community, and self-reliance are limiting the capacity of village seed banks to fully address seed system concerns for farmer welfare. First, I address how perceptions of farmer seed exchange as “traditional” lead seed bank organizers to overlook the context of a dynamic and market-integrated seed system. Second, I demonstrate how “community” or village-level institutions for seed do not automatically foster the trust, equity, or efficiency expected of them. And third, I show how an emphasis on seed banks as tools for “self-reliance” prevents development practitioners from assessing institutional relationships and hearing farmers’ visions for effective support. That notions of tradition, community, and self-reliance constrain institutions does not mean they should be avoided or discounted. To the contrary, by explicitly addressing the presence and influence of these narratives, support for agricultural livelihoods such as seed banks can be strengthened.

2. DECODING DECENTRALIZED DEVELOPMENT

The narratives surrounding seed banks in Telangana are part of a larger trend in international development that has

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shifted away from centralized government schemes toward more decentralized, NGO-led, or participatory approaches. While attempts to valorize the agency of subaltern peoples (Scott, 1985) and increase representation of marginalized groups have been lauded, many scholars have also drawn attention to the weaknesses presented by such an approach. False dichotomies can be reinforced by positioning tradition in opposition to modernity (Gupta, 1998) or indigenous knowledge in opposition to scientific knowledge (Agrawal, 1995). The institutionalization of indigenous knowledge or practice can result in assumptions of transferability despite its contextual foundation (Briggs, 2005). An emphasis on the “local” risks romanticization, distorting both internal power dynamics and their relationship to national and transnational forces (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). The term “community,” Nelson and Wright (1995) note, is more often used by outsiders than members of the group in question, creating an imagined consensus which serves to more easily define needs. The emphasis on self-reliance, while signifying an important shift toward self-determination in the wake of failed top-down development initiatives, has been criticized as fictional (Rugumamu, 1997) and linked with processes of neoliberalization (Peck & Tickell, 2002) that place private interests and free markets at the heart of development. The combined narratives of tradition, community, and self-reliance can be seen as the product of ongoing trends in development which perpetuate the “agrarian allegory of the peasant,” a rhetorical framing of rural livelihoods produced through colonial encounters and reinvented through contemporary struggles (Tsing, 2003). This case study brings critiques of these development narratives to bear on village seed banks, rooting them in empirical detail while lending a new emphasis on materiality, economic dynamism, and ecological change.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses thick description and interpretative qualitative analysis to highlight how the details obscured by narratives of tradition, community, and self-reliance, come to matter most. Over a period of 8 weeks, 60 semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted including farmers (43), seed retailers (8), high-level and mid-level NGO administrators (3), NGO field staff (4), and seed scientists at the regional agricultural research station (2). Of the farmers interviewed, 18 were women and 25 men. All respondents reported access to at least one half acre of land, with the majority farming between 1 and 3 acres and 5 cultivating more than 10 acres. Interviews addressed farmers’ cropping patterns, seed source for each crop, use of exchange, credit or cash for seed procurement, experiences of seed shortage, concerns over seed quality, and perceptions of the village seed banks. Farmers included those closely involved with the seed banks as managers or participants (15), as well as non-participating farmers in villages within and surrounding the seed banks. Participant observation at village seed banks and seed retailers as well as meetings for farmers groups, women’s self-help groups, and farmers’ cooperatives provided insights into the institutional landscape of seed systems at the study site. Written documents in the form of project proposals and progress reports by the NGO, project funders, and available seed bank inventories were analyzed to trace the vision and implementation of the seed bank over time.

4. SEED BANKS ENVISIONED AND ENACTED

As July turned to August in 2015, delayed rains and long dry-spells were taking a toll on farmers’ hopes for their harvest. Seedlings were drying out, plants were stunted, and large portions of farms had been left fallow. Even if the rains picked up in August, most farmers said they would be lucky if they earned enough to cover investments in seeds, fertilizers, and oxen for plowing. If the rains did not come, many planned to migrate for work as wage laborers in order to earn a living and make payments on their debts. With the increasing frequency of such drought episodes destabilizing rural livelihoods, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies were exploring new strategies for supporting farmers in adapting to drier conditions.

Pigeon pea (*Cajanus cajan*, also referred to as red gram) dominates the Mahabubnagar landscape during the monsoon (*kharif*) season accompanied by large swaths of sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), segmented ponds for rice (*Oryza sativa*, called paddy), varied legumes including green gram (*Vigna radiata*), cow pea (*Vigna unguiculata*), horsegram (*Macrotyloma uniflorum*), and black gram (*Vigna mungo*), and occasional lush plots of vegetables. Two recently introduced *kharif* crops, cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum*) and maize (*Zea mays*), are also rapidly expanding their terrain. During the dry (*rabi*) season, groundnut sold for processed oil dominates plantings. For rice, cotton, maize, and some vegetables, the use of improved or hybrid varieties has become ubiquitous, while legumes and sorghum are generally local landraces. With the exception of rice and vegetables, which require irrigation, all of the major *kharif* crops in this region are rain-fed. But without sufficient and well-distributed rains, even the hardiest rain-fed crops wither.

A 2006 drought adaptation initiative with both international and state support funded pilot projects to assist villages in areas most affected by drought. A regional NGO, Agricultural Livelihoods Network (ALN),¹ received funding through the initiative to implement a suite of drought adaptation initiatives including the installation of “community-managed seed banks.” ALN staff described the goal of the seed banks as providing timely, high-quality, affordable seed through community self-reliance. This village-based institution of a seed bank would take advantage of an established tradition of seed exchange. Organizers described problems of seed scarcity and dependence on inefficient government supplies. The director of the regional branch lamented the poor quality of farmers’ varieties and explained the necessity of introducing improved varieties so that they could benefit from increased yields.² The ALN seed banks focus on increasing access to modern varieties rather than promoting conservation of genetically diverse landraces. Where project proponents do mention diversity, it is in the form of encouraging diversified cropping patterns for income stability. In this regard ALN hopes to reintroduce millets, a group of drought-tolerant grains which have nearly disappeared from the landscape over the last few generations, through the seed bank. In contrast to many organizations in India promoting village seed banks with goals of agrobiodiversity conservation or food sovereignty (e.g., Navdanya, Deccan Development Society, Green Center), ALN is explicitly modernization focused. The influence of tradition, community, and self-reliance narratives was unexpected within a modernization-focused organization and underscores their persistence.

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