



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2013, Stuttgart-Hohenheim
“Agricultural development within the rural-urban continuum”

Challenges in Local Seed Systems — the Case of Vegetable and Legume Seeds in Western Kenya

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Abstract

Locally adapted, quality seeds are the most critical input to secure good harvests and food security. Local seed systems can ensure that diversity of crops and varieties are available for small scale farmers. Most of the research focuses on major crops such as maize. The current study focused on assessed seed systems for traditional and exotic vegetables as well as legumes.

For this study, 20 structured interviews with small scale farmers were held in four different villages in two districts of Western Kenya. Farmers were purposely sampled out of 60 farmers who participated in a study on “Improving Nutrition through Agrobiodiversity” with baseline information about each farm being available. Criteria for selecting villages were distance to main roads, urban centres and local authorities. The interview included on-farm seed production, storage, selection as well as market seed availability and affordability. In addition, seven market inventories were conducted to gather information on availability and prices.

Diversity of crops ranged between 2 and 10 per farm for vegetables (mean= 5) and between 0 and 5 for legumes (mean= 2). Intra-species diversity was rather low: only one variety was grown for half of the crops investigated. The main reasons mentioned by farmers were directly related to seed availability in 57 % of cases, due to (i) seeds of other varieties being unavailable; (ii) lack of knowledge e.g. that other varieties exist; and (iii) lack of money to purchase other varieties. Seeds from own production were preferred by 15 farmers out of 20, mainly because of financial and quality reasons while only few favoured certified seeds (4) and informal markets (1). Fifty six per cent of farmers were of the opinion, that there was more seed and information exchange between farmers in the past compared to today, suggesting a decline of traditional exchange systems. The distance to the market may be an important determination of seed acquisition and this will be analysed.

It is proposed that improving marketing and availability of seeds as well as strengthening traditional exchange systems should be considered more strongly to provide high diversity.

Keywords: Agrobiodiversity, informal markets, Kenya, seed systems, small scale farmers, vegetables