



Tropentag, September 9-11, 2020, virtual conference

“Food and nutrition security and its resilience
to global crises”

The Role of the Albanian Gene Bank in Addressing and Improving the Livelihoods of the Poorest Farmers. Case Study - The Northern Alps of Albania

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Abstract

The livelihoods of many farmers in the northern Albanian Alps depend on agricultural production. This study assessed the impact of the Albanian Gene Bank on the poorest farmers through providing improved seeds of maize, beans and vegetables.

In a case study 55 surveys and semi-structured interviews were held. The livelihood framework was used as a methodological framework to analyse the food security aspect and the well-being of farmers.

The results revealed that farmers are totally dependent on agricultural production for their livelihood. Only a few households have diversified their rural income via agro-tourism. Men are exclusively head of the households and the ones who contribute to the rural economy.

Farmers cultivate small parcels of land in the range of 0.1- 1 ha. The fragmentation of the parcels, is one of the main reasons for the low yields encountered. The autochthone varieties of maize, beans and vegetables (garlic, pumpkin, squash, eggplant, and peper) are good adapted to the local conditions. Farmers trust these local varieties, which are conserved for over 80-150 years. Farmers produce for self-subsistence of the households. Although agricultural productivity is low, farmers continue and prefer the use of the local varieties rather than the proposed hybrid varieties. The Albanian Gene Bank interferes in the livelihood framework by providing hybrid seeds and improving the techniques of local seeds preservation. Recently, some of the local production is consumed in the households for agro-tourism purposes. In so doing, there is a diversification of activities, and farming is supporting the rural economy even more.

Therefore, preserving the agro-biodiversity of the local Albanian seeds and combining it with adapted high yielding varieties is enhancing and fostering the rural development. The Gene Bank can be one of the crucial actors to improve the livelihood of smallholder farmers. A combination of autochthone seeds and well-adopted hybrid seeds for certain crops can be a very good option. There is a need to deepen this topic in future studies. In the near future, the local government should work closely with the Gene Bank to improve the rural economy.

Keywords: Adopted local varieties, Albanian gene bank, autochthone seeds, farmers, livelihoods framework