Regional Approach to Food Security in South Asia: Operational Modality of the SAARC Seed Bank

Discussant's Note

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20-21 December 2012, Kathmandu
1. Rationale and Purpose of SAARC Seed Bank

- **Preamble:**
  - Collective self-reliance in agriculture with respect to attaining seed security
  - Contribute to harmonized seed testing and certification and seed trade

- **Objectives:**
  - Provide regional support to national seed security efforts
  - Promote increase of Seed Replacement Rate (SSR)
  - Act as a regional seed security reserve

- **Analysis:**
  - Seed security not defined and inadequately addressed
  - Seed security = assured access primarily through self-production + additionally through purchase of seeds of desired type and quality
  - Over-emphasis on short-term seed security through external supply/trading mechanisms
  - No consideration for long-term seed security through strengthening **local and national seed systems**
  - No consideration for the issue of **Seed Sovereignty**

  - Lack of clarity on the concept of seed bank
    - The concept appears to comes from **Community Seed Bank** which focus on the whole seed systems: conservation/maintenance; production; and distribution
    - Without conservation/maintenance of seeds, it is just a seed business
    - Question is are we talking about SAARC Seed Bank or SAARC Seed Trading
    - Should it be a seed reserve or a dynamic seed system?
    - Emergency purpose (demand driven) or forced supply (supply driven)

  - Over emphasis on SSR
    - Focus on modern varieties – appears like seed program than seed bank
    - Undermining of local seeds and seed systems
    - One sided promotion of seed trading/private sector
    - No role for farmers and farming communities other than recipients

  - Role of farmers/ farming communities and protection of their rights
2. Scope of the SAARC Seed Bank

- Coverage of crops and varieties
  - Basis for inclusion of crop species
    - Why limit crops species?
    - Why millets and vegetables important for food security of small holders excluded?
    - Even undermines provision of ITPGRFA
  - Basis of preparing a common list of varieties
    - How this will address diverse seed needs of farmers?
    - Why to limit the varieties – this will defeat the whole purpose
    - Danger of narrowing down genetic base and negatively impact genetic diversity
  - Kind of varieties not specified
    - Hybrid and transgenic varieties should not be included in the system as these are considered to decrease seed security
    - These varieties are well dealt by private sector and these varieties

- Seed information system
  - No consideration for establishment of seed information system
  - Sharing of information on genetic resource base of the region is important and should be part of the SAARC Seed Bank

- Scope for research and breeding
  - Materials allowed for research and breeding but no objective promotion of such activities (only mentioned in MTA); also requires to concept note
  - Research and breeding for commercial purpose requires written consent of provider (conflict with MTA 3.1)

3. SAARC Seed Reserve

- Requires establishment of National Seed Bank
  - Earmark agreed amount above any national reserve
  - Many create surplus/ non-demand if all countries produce and keep the serve for their national requirement
  - Whether countries would be able to maintain such a centralized physical seed bank/ seed reserve

- Demand assessment and supply mechanism
  - Mechanism to collect real demand; demand based on SRR may be problematic
- Seed production is a specialized process quite different than food production and involved, at least, 3 generation system with inputs from research system
- Supply side is not clear – who will produce seed? Role of farmers and pricing mechanism
- Supply (production and transport) could be expensive in the lack of decentralized seed production
- Strict quality control and certification is likely to exclude local/ farmers' varieties
- Seed vulnerability mapping may be required but not mentioned
- What is seed allocated for SAARC Seed Bank remains without use/demand

- Access/ withdrawal
  - Priority for seed withdrawal for national need vs other SAARC countries

4. Operational Mechanism

- Institutional mechanism
  - Limited representation of farmers in Board, and no representation of CSOs
  - Private sector entrepreneurs/ traders shall transact all activities on behalf of provider(s)/ recipient(s)

- MTA process
  - Intellectual property rights (IPRs) issues
    - Access to without the need to track individual accessions and free of charge
    - But requires PIC for research and commercial application
    - Apply IPR consistent with relevant international agreements
    - Material under development at the discretion of developer, including farmers

  - Transfer may take long process due to need of quality assurance and certification mechanism

- Harmonization with national policies and laws
  - Seed Policy and Act
  - PVP and Farmers' Right Act
  - Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) Act
5. Some Suggestions/ Concluding Remarks

- The document is merely representation of political economy of seed business: basically an agreement for seed business than a real seed bank
- Need to bring in missing elements

Figure: Context of SAARC Seed Bank (CSBs = Community Seed Banks)

- SAARC region has vast/rick wealth of genetic resources and has huge opportunity of benefit from sharing and using these resources
- SAARC Seed Bank should be used as a vehicle/ means for achieving:
  - Regional cooperation for conservation and use of PGRFA
  - Access and benefit sharing through regional ABS framework
  - Regional Conservation and Development Fund
- Strong need for review and amendment of the Agreement even before ratification by the national governments; otherwise most likely to fail and remain as a history
Thank You!

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