

Seed fairs in Nampula: Promoting Food Sovereignty through participation, diversity and valuing local knowledge¹

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Genetic material is crucial for all agricultural production systems and its management (types, quality and diversity) determines to a large extent the degree of food sovereignty in a given community. In October 2008, the General Union of Agricultural Cooperatives of Nampula (UGCAN) organised 5 simultaneous seed² fairs in Anchilo, Monapo (Kuthukwa), Muhala, Namaita and Namina. Approximately 700 members of the 2000 members participated. The concept is simple: *“bringing peasants together to exchange seeds”*

Objectives of the seed fairs

In principle peasants keep their seed, because as they say *“who doesn’t keep his seed is not a real peasant”*. But the management of seed is a dynamic process and peasants always will need different seed. Thus the UGCAN began to organise the seed fairs to:

1. Create an opportunity for peasants to exchange genetic material, adapted to local conditions and knowledge;
2. Show and promote the diversity of the different seeds used by peasants;
3. Promote exchange of experiences on the production of varieties adapted to local conditions;
4. Create awareness on the importance of peasants controlling their own seed.

Since the beginning the peasants realised the importance of the fairs and are very eager to participate.

From knowing the reality to looking for alternatives

The seed fairs are an important tool to maintain the diversity of seeds, as it brings together peasants from different regions, who use different varieties. Between neighbours peasants use to exchange seeds anyway, which helps to explain the small differences in seed stocks between neighbours.

But in the development context of Mozambique, seed fairs are not only a tool to improve peasant production, but are at the same time a political and strategic intervention of the utmost importance to farmer organisations.

From the experiences with cotton and paprika production, the general experiences with agricultural marketing and the efforts to introduce technological packages by extension agents, the peasants understand perfectly well the risks of dependency, of high investment costs (debt) and of specialising in a context of uncertain climate and markets. At the same time farmer organisations are becoming more self confident and aware that after years of marginalisation their knowledge and way of organising their production system are important after all. Seed fairs can thus be considered a translation of the analysis of these risks and as a sign of self confidence³.

¹ This article is based on observations during the annual seed fairs since 2002 and interviews conducted with participants of the seed fairs in October 2008

² When seed is mentioned shoots or branches used for propagation (like cassava or sweet potatoe) are included

³ Frequently invited representatives from the agricultural department commented that the fairs were nice but that

The regional fairs also allow for local leaders to gain experience in organising activities. Besides by organising the fairs at regional level regional leaders are obliged to stay for the organisation, which opens opportunities for others to go to the other fairs⁶.

Metodological aspects of the seed fairs

1. The fairs are anual and organised about 2 month before the onset of the rainy season.
2. The invitations by the UGCAN state clearly: that for each fair a woman and a man are invited to represent their area, the importance of bringing diverse seeds and the importance of bringing seed in suficient quantity.
3. Each area calls a meeting to select its representatives for the other 4 fairs.
4. An organizing comitee composed of the leaders of the 2 or 3 areas of the region is created. The location of the fair within the region is rotating between the areas and cooperatives.
5. To assist the orqanising comitees UGCAN developed guidelines for the organisation.
6. The organising comitee receives an amout of money from UGCAN for the organisation which includes food for the participants and guests. At the end of the fair a breakdown of the costs is presented to the participants.
7. The fairs are to be a space for exchange of seed and knowledge regarding seeds like time of planting, prefered type of soil, water needs etc.
8. To stimulate that the fairs harbour suficient diversity and quantity of seeds premiums are awarded at the end of the fair to the areas who bring most⁷.
9. After the fairs the board of UGCAN holds an evaluation as to review possible adaptations for the next year.

Diversity is the basis of agriculatural systems of peasants⁸

All regional fairs had more than 20 different varieties on display⁹ (between 23 e 21 varieties) which can be classified in the following manner:

Cereals : maize, rice, millet, sorghum, marupi (type of "wild" grain)

Beans: cowpeas, mung beans, fava beans, bambara nuts, "namara" beans, pigeon peas, butter beans

Oleaginous: groundnuts, sesame, Nachinchin (type of local sesame local), cashew, ricinous

Tubers : cassave, sweet potatoe, yam and minane (local "wild" tuber)

Vegetables and legumes : okra, tomato, garlic, cabbage, chilly, pumpkin, cucumber, onion, pepino local, massuko, cabaças

Medicinal plants : African potatoe (Uapaca kirkiana), Indian mulberry (Morinda citrifolia) Noni e Kalomba, Neem

Fruits and others : sugarcane, watermelon, banana, oranges, lemon, pineapple

In one fair for maize, groundnuts, cassave, sorghum and rice participants identified at least 3 different varieties as for for fava and jugo beans, sugarcane, pumpkin, sweet potatoe,

⁶ A monopoly of leaders on colective benefits (like exchange visits) is a common fenomenon in social organisations.

⁷ All winning areas brought more than 11 varieties to the fairs with a maximum of 15 .

⁸ Dados das 5 feiras de Outubro de 2008

⁹ It is important to note that often while recording the varieties for the awards, variety within a certain crop (e.g. early maturing and slowly maturing) is not being recorded as different varieties although the difference is known to the participants.

and millet at least 2 different varieties were identified

Besides the seeds for agricultural production there are always seeds, leaves or roots on display for medicinal (e.g. Namuassa) or social use. In all fairs practically all material was exchanged (more than 95%)

What do participants think?

All participants of the seed fairs seem to be happy with the activity and possible complaints refer to logistics or the fact that seed had finished before they could get some themselves. All spoken to managed to exchange all their seeds.

Ana Leite from Murrupula participated for the first time and brought a variety of cassava with a very light skin, not bitter and without need to be cooked to the fair. Because of these characteristics this type of cassava is much sought after. She took home maize seeds and a sample of sugarcane, which she had never seen before. Besides exchanging the material she collected information on how to plant and other qualities of the sugar cane. According to Ana the good thing about the fairs are the diversity and that one can discover new varieties never seen before.

Faustino Salimo (UCASN (farmers union) Cuamba) participated for the first time as well, he brought ecute beans to exchange and looked for sesame, which is not available in Cuamba (according to Salimo mainly for commercial reasons). Unfortunately the sesame was finished before he could get some. In Cuamba they usually get their seeds through IKURU company (a partner of UCASN), but the seed available is only maize, ecute beans and groundnuts. According to Salimo the advantage of the seedfairs are the low prices and the possibility to exchange [experiences] between farmers.

Margarita Amisse from Naticiri participated for the third time. She brought groundnuts to the market and returned with sesame, nhemba beans, and rice. Besides she got maize seeds for a neighbour who had requested her to get some. According to Margarita the benefit of the fairs is that seeds in the shops is expensive and the huge variety in seeds in the fairs.

António Peça (Nacuaho B), participated for the second time, and brought maize to the fair. As he was part of the commission to record the material the participants brought he didn't have time to exchange any seeds, however a friend organised marupi for him and he also managed to get the cassava from Murrupula and orange sweet potatoe. António appreciates the fairs for being an event of peasants and because of the big variety of material available.

Adelaide Mesquita (M'puto), participated for the fourth time. She brought groundnuts of the Virginia variety and returned with seeds of cashewtrees and jugo beans. She chose cashew as she recently acquired a piece of land with old trees, which she wants to replace with new ones. The variety she acquires are from Namaita and known for growing fast and have bigger nuts. The jugo beans variety she got matures quickly (2 instead of 3 months). What she likes about the fairs are the diversity and the possibility to recover seeds which one loses when production is low. According to her at the end of the fairs there always appear non-member farmers from the area to also try to get seeds. "The fairs bring new members to the cooperatives" she says over time¹⁰.

Why do peasants look for certain seeds?

Firstly peasants look for seeds they used to have but for some reason lost. This can be

¹⁰ This observation is confirmed by what happened at the closing of the 2006 central fair, when a woman from the area and no member asked to speak. She praised the fair and asked who organised the event and how she could become member of such an organisation.

poor production, which obliged the family to eat or sell what they saved (this is often the case with maize and groundnuts as they are both cashcrop and foodcrop and relatively easy to sell in times of crisis¹¹). Marupi is a wild cereal and traditionally used in porridge. The reason it appears in the fairs might be that these days it doesn't easily reproduce naturally anymore.

Fast maturing also attracts a lot of interest from farmers (like the Virginia variety of groundnuts, but there are also faster maturing varieties of maize, beans, sorghum, cassava and millet found at the fairs). This material is in demand as it helps to reduce the vulnerability of peasants with regard to the climate. Fasting harvests reduces the period of food scarcity (at the end of the dry season, beginning of rainy season) as one doesn't need to wait 4 months anymore.

Resistance to diseases and pests is another important factor as shown by a variety of cassava more resistant to brown streak and certain varieties of millet and sorghum with long "hairs" making it difficult for birds to get to them.

Then there are culinary qualities like certain varieties of cassava, which need less cooking and are sweeter to eat.

Apart from these practical motives curiosity and a drive for innovation also can be motives for acquiring certain seeds as Mrs Leite showed when she exchanged to get a certain type of sugarcane she had never seen before. This can also be considered a motive of Mr Salimo for acquiring sesame. Sesame is a known cash crop but doesn't yet appear in the markets of Cuamba and thus the seeds fair presented an opportunity to have access to the seeds for trials at low cost.

Over the years one can notice an increased availability at the fairs of certain varieties. Concrete examples are "Virginia" groundnuts which in the beginning always was brought to the fairs by farmers from Anchilo (Muezia, M'puto and Niapal), but in recent years also farmers from other zones brought these seeds to the fair; another example is the brownstreak resistant variety of cassava originally coming from the Namina area, but these days even farmers from Monapo, severely hit by brownstreak, present cassava at the fairs.

Conclusions regarding farmers behaviour

Peasants value the diversity at the fairs which is bigger than in shops or at other sources for seed (e.g. seed provision by projects).

Peasants appreciate the easy access to seeds (at the fairs in principle seed is exchanged or otherwise sold at a symbolic price)

Farmers appreciate to have a space of their own.

The fair is considered an opportunity to get to know new varieties and as an opportunity to recover "lost" varieties.

Peasants actively look for and exchange knowledge regarding seed. In fact, the fairs prove yet again that men and women peasants have strategies and curiosity to innovate their farming system.

Peasants don't seem to look for "high yielding" varieties but rather have an interest in varieties which increase the probability of a yield (short cycle and early maturing, pest resistant)

¹¹ Neste contexto é importante de saber que por causa das incertezas climáticas os camponeses semeiam, dependendo como as chuvas caem, 2, 3, até 4 a mesma cultura.

Conclusions regarding the role of seed fairs

The seedfairs have an important role in guaranteeing access to seed and in preserving the diversity of seeds and of peasant farming systems. Adapting the organization of the fairs to allow for more participation contributed to these functions

At the same time, the fairs have a role in accelerating innovation processes in the farming systems, by facilitating the introduction of different varieties.

And beyond direct aspects of farming, the seedfairs are a way to appreciate and strengthen farmers' knowledge and local culture as well as an instrument of the farmers' movement to mobilize its members, to strengthen self-organisation, to increase visibility and to show a different approach in a context in which local organizations often are created to receive from donors.