

International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

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The Treaty in the news

Spreading the benefits of agricultural biodiversity in a drought-hit region of northern India.



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Sharing the benefits of agricultural biodiversity can sometimes mean bringing back or introducing new crop varieties in diversity-poor regions to help farmers improve food security and cope with the effects of climate change.

The International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources' benefit-sharing Fund has provided nearly 300,000 dollars of assistance for such a project assisting poor farmers in the north Indian region of Uttar Pradesh.

Implemented by Humana People to People India in partnership with Bioversity International, the two and half year "Seeds for Life" venture has significantly contributed to the development of sustainable food security in a rice and wheat-producing region suffering from weather instability, lack of agrobiodiversity and poor access to water for irrigation.

The project worked with 200 farmers organisations and self-help groups from 50 villages in the districts of Badaun and Unnao, involving a total of 2,300. Moreover, 2,000 farmers participated in crowdsourcing of wheat and rice. The population of the districts are either small and marginal farmers, from both Hindu and Muslim communities.

"The farmers had many problems – a lack of water, changing temperatures and the bad effects of the increasing use of chemicals and fertilisers," said the project leader Dharmopal Gurjar.

"The areas we worked in did not have a high diversity of indigenous varieties or wild crop relatives. Moreover, the farmers didn't know what else was out there and were reliant on just local seed dealers. Unless they saw different varieties grown in fields, they wouldn't believe in them, so the project adopted a farmer to farmer learning approach.

The initial selection of seeds for varietal trials was carried out by Bioversity International, many coming from India's national gene banks. The project then led facilitated participatory varietal trials on rice and wheat to select seeds for multiplication and distribution among farmers. They were trained to test the new varieties on their farms which ones were more suitable. They eventually selected more than 50 varieties of wheat and rice.

"Seeds for Life" established seven seed banks for the farmers to store their seeds as part of a move towards in situ conservation. The farmers were trained in the system of rice intensification, a climate-smart and agro-ecological methodology for increasing the productivity of rice and other crops by changing the management of plants, soil, water and nutrients. It was so successful that fifty farmers participated and established model fields with controls.

"Now that the project is over, farmers continue to apply the knowledge they gained on plant breeding and seed conservation. Before, many didn't have any access at all to quality seeds and while traveling through the villages you would typically see several varieties growing in the same field" said Dharmopal.

Humana says the results were impressive with yields rising by 15 to 25 percent, 25-30 percent water saved on irrigation, a 50 percent reduction in application of chemical fertilizers, and 33 percent saved on seed input. Farmers also learnt to apply line sowing in wheat cultivation, which is also giving better results.

As well as introducing the farmers to new wheat and rice varieties, the project worked with more than 1,800 local women to promote the moringa tree, known locally as the drumstick tree, which is a common crop in the south of India but less known in the north. Moringa is drought resistant, grows very fast, and is highly nutritive. A new moringa plant can be grown using the branches of an existing one. The training was also conducted by nutritional experts who taught ways to incorporate moringa in the daily diets through economical recipes.

"The tree has now become popular as a good additional source of fresh, green leaves for cooking during 8 – 9 months of the year. Normal vegetables only last for a few months. The moringa trees will truly add to improvement in their

nutrition,” said Anne Marie Moeller, Humana project specialist.

The GAIA-Movement also helped fund the project, and the city of Vienna, Austria provided additional finance to continue one of the project sites. More funding is now being sought to continue and expand Seeds for Life.

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