

Introduction

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In the previous section, innovative farmer participatory approaches were used so that farmers could select varieties they preferred. Once such cultivars are identified, they need to be popularised. This can be done by using the existing regulatory framework for varietal release where seed is made cheaper by providing subsidies for the production and distribution of certified seed. The use of this certified seed is promoted by government extension services, provided by state departments of agriculture and KVKs. However, such procedures can be lengthy for varieties identified using participatory methods. Not least of the potential difficulties, is that it may take several years for a farmer-identified variety to be entered into the appropriate trials that will qualify it for release. Indeed, once entered in the trials, it may fail because of inappropriate testing regimes (*see* Chapter 2). It is also likely that it will prove impossible to enter the variety into the trials if the organisation promoting the entry does not have influence in the committees that formulate the trials. In the following chapter, an alternative approach of networking in the NGO sector is described that alleviates the necessity of obtaining the official recommendation of the extension services.

A network is a loose association of organisations that agree to co-operate to meet a common objective. In this case, the provision of seeds of new varieties to resource-poor farmers. The first lesson that emerged from the KRIBP initiative described in the following chapter, was that often NGOs did not have this objective in mind. Sometimes they assumed that the task of providing seed of new varieties was adequately dealt with by the formal sector, or if this was not the case, that the task was beyond the capacities of an NGO. Both assumptions are false. The experiences outlined earlier in this book show that resource-poor farmers typically do not have access to seed of appropriate varieties, and that to make this provision is perhaps one of the easier tasks an NGO committed to functional development can make.

Even when NGOs did provide seed, it was usually to provide seed of recommended cultivars. This was done because recommended cultivars attract subsidies. Even NGOs that were convinced by alternative approaches were reluctant to promote cultivars that were not recommended and not subsidised, as cheaper seed was considered paramount. Of course, most NGOs that were concerned with seed supply accepted the conventional wisdom that recommended cultivars were the most appropriate.

NGOs have greater flexibility than GOs and are less constrained by official policies and frameworks. More innovative farmer-led approaches such as participatory varietal selection and dissemination can be adopted more easily by NGOs.

The above analysis shows the weakness and strengths of the NG sector in seed supply. KRIBP have used networking to raise awareness NGOs of new approaches, and to facilitate activity by NGOs by providing seed. This is an effective way of scaling up participatory research to make it much more cost effective. The following chapter describes the initial encouraging results of networking by KRIBP in western India. It indicates that only a few NGOs in a state need to invest resources in farmer participatory research to identify or even breed new varieties. Other NGOs can share in this information, if they are part of the network, and procure, multiply and distribute seed of farmer-preferred varieties identified using participatory approaches.

The chapter describes activities conducted up to 1996. Since then, networking has extended to more organisations. The most notable example is with the farm science centre Vidya Bhaman KVK, Badgaon, Udaipur. They lead an NGO/GO forum, designed to help collaboration between NGOs and government organisations. The NGO forum members have tried promoting extension commendations, and have supplied minikits to farmers in the villages in which they operate. There

were difficulties in timely supply of seeds by the GOs to the NGOs, and in these trials farmer acceptance of the recommended varieties was low. The NGO/GO forum heard of the work at KRIBP and were attracted by the more practical alternative of participatory varietal selection. They are now collaborating in the testing in Udaipur district of varieties identified in KRIBP. The inclusion of a network (the NGO/GO forum) within a network clearly makes scaling up even more effective.

Whatever form of network is established, seed needs to be produced on a large scale. The formal sector usually relies on contracting large farmers to produce seed, that is then centrally processed. The formal sector is able to take advantages of production and distribution subsidies for certified seed. NGOs work in a more local context, and often the varieties will not qualify for subsidies because they are not released or recommended in the approved package of practices. A number of alternative methods have been tried:

- Village-level seed banking, in which farmers are asked to return to a village level seed bank twice the quantity of seed that they have been given at the beginning of the season. The organisational problems are not difficult to anticipate, and control of seed quality is almost impossible when seed from so many different sources is involved.
- Village level seed producer groups can be established in which a smaller group of farmers, often those that have access to better land, set up a seed producer group to produce seed of newly identified varieties. Economies of scale are greater than in the seed banking approach, and seed quality can be better controlled as there are fewer producers involved. This approach is being introduced in KRIBP in which village-based seed co-operatives '*Bheej Sahakar*' are being established with the help of the project.
- KRIBP also provides farmers with access to seed from outside sources. The project can purchase seed from contracted farmers or from outside agencies for sale to farmers in the project area. Commercial organisations can be encouraged to produce and sell seed of new varieties to the villagers, and larger farmers can be encouraged to do so.

In support of these efforts, KRIBP is undertaking research to study the seed supply systems in the villages to understand the most important points at which to intervene in the seed supply chain. For some varieties, these local informal seed supply systems that involve spread from farmer to farmer may be the most effective. Evidence is emerging in KRIBP of the rapid spread of farmer-preferred varieties by farmer to farmer spread.

An unexpected finding is that farmer to spread is sometimes most effective in villages and areas not directly served by the project. Sometimes the project has supplied seed to a non project village on a single occasion as the result of farmers learning of the project activities and asking for seed. Farmers cannot rely on the project to supply more seed, so when the new variety is greatly liked most of the seed harvested by the farmers in the village is saved for resowing. Once this requirement is met, the surplus seed also tends to be used for sowing—it is sold to, or exchanged with, other farmers in the village or neighbouring villages. In contrast, in project villages, more of the seed is used for consumption or sale in local markets. However, despite the effectiveness of farmer to farmer spread, a total reliance on this mechanism would probably result in a slower rate of spread. Seed spreads from farmer to farmer from an original seed source supplied by outsiders. A faster spread should be achieved by a frequent and strategically dispersed supply of 'source' seed.