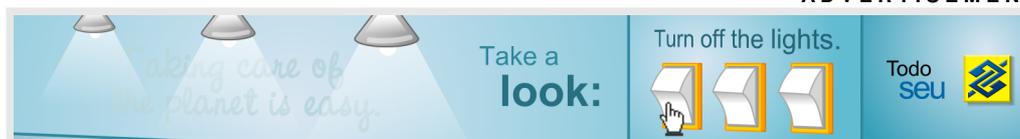


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LANGUAGES

DEVELOPMENT: NGOs Wary of Doomsday Seed Vault

By Keya Acharya

BANGALORE, Mar 4 (IPS) - Agricultural non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in India and elsewhere are criticising the newly-opened Global Seed Vault (GSV) at Svalbard in Norway as fundamentally unjust in its objectives.

The Barcelona-based agriculture lobby, GRAIN, with branches in major developing nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, says a serious deficiency of the seed vault is that it deals basically with state and private-body depositors to the bank, thereby excluding the rights of poor farmers who cannot access these seeds.

GRAIN says the GSV's ex-situ storage system takes unique plant varieties away from farming communities that originally created, selected, protected and shared the seeds. Farmers, it holds, do not know how to access the scientific and institutional framework involved in setting up the system and are excluded.

"This system forgets that farmers are the world's original, and ongoing, plant breeders," GRAIN's Asia Programme Officer, Shalini Bhutani, who is based in New Delhi, told IPS.

Negotiating intellectual property and other rights over the seeds, originally conserved by farmers, thus becomes the business of governments and the seed industry itself, she says.

Decisions on the GSV will be taken by the Norwegian government, currently regarded as trustworthy, but without guarantee that its policies will change. It has a ten-year agreement with depositors that included clauses allowing them to be terminated if policies change.

Management of the GSV is spelled out in a tripartite agreement between the Norwegian government, the Global Crop Diversity Trust (GCDT) and the Nordic Genetic Resource Centre, a cooperative effort of the Nordic countries.

GRAIN alleges that decisions on the GSV will be shared with the GCDT, a private entity with strong corporate funding which brings to the forefront all the 'terrible controversies' over access to and benefits from global agricultural biodiversity.

Trans-national seed corporations currently control over half of the world's 30 billion US dollar yearly seed market, buying up many public plant-breeding programmes that have governments relinquishing control over them. "The ultimate beneficiaries will thus be the very same corporations that are at the roots of crop-diversity destruction," says a GRAIN publication.

But Cary Fowler, head of the Global Crop Diversity Trust (GCDT), in charge of the GSV, says such criticism "seriously misrepresents the purpose and workings of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, and portrays the GCDT in an inaccurate, misleading and unflattering manner."

"The Seed Vault has been welcomed by over 165 countries and the Food and Agricultural Organisations (FAO)'s Commission on Genetic Resources, and it is already being used by developed and developing countries and by NGO seed savers (though not by corporations)", said Fowler in an e-mail interview with IPS.

The GSV built into the Arctic permafrost, with a natural temperature of minus 6 degrees centigrade, some 1,000 km away from the North Pole, has three cold rooms further cooled to minus 18 degrees C and is capable of storing 4.5million batches of seeds.

Should some major disaster hit world agriculture, such as a nuclear war or a natural disaster, countries could turn to what is popularly referred to as the 'doomsday vault', to pull out seeds and restart food production.

But there are many who are unhappy with the GSV continuing with existing in the science of agricultural conservation.

The Bangalore-based GREEN Foundation, which won the United Nations' Equator Prize in 2004 for its work on seed conservation on farms through community seed-bank networks, run mainly by women, says the vault's claim to protect genetic biodiversity is more 'illusion than reality'.

"It is already a decade since the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) realised that gene banks had their own limitations, starting from major power breakdowns, to excluding farmers' access to these banks, to realising that seeds conserved under freeze conditions did not evolve when grown under changed environmental conditions," Vanaja Ramprasad, founder-director of the GREEN Foundation told IPS. "It is a sad commentary on the science behind the assumption that the world's food is secure inside a freezer," she said.

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**Entrance to the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, Norway**

Credit: Mari Tefre / Svalbard Global Seed Vault

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NGOs like Green Foundation, GRAIN and the Hyderabad-based Deccan Development Society believe that involving farmers to grow seeds in their field, conserve and exchange these with others is the most secure method of conserving genetic diversity and resources.

In the last ten years, says Ramprasad, there have been worldwide efforts to collect germplasm and conserve them on farmers' fields, breaking the notion that germplasm was meant only for breeding purposes. "This reinforced the fact that in situ conservation of germplasm was not only the food security of millions of the world's population, but also identified as imperative to food sovereignty," she said.

The Hyderabad-based Deccan Development Society (DDS), working in rural empowerment of poor dalit (the lowest caste in India's social hierarchy) women, and conserving indigenous cereals such as millets, does not believe that the scientific community can save crop diversity by cold-storage systems.

"Global seed wealth can survive only in the farms and homes of global rural communities. The GSV takes away these seeds from the farmer and breaks the first link in the food chain," says P.V. Satheesh, founder of DDS.

A depositor in the GSV currently is the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), run under the FAO and has approximately 15 global gene banks holding the world's most widely-used food crops, under a legal trusteeship arrangement on behalf of the international community.

GRAIN faults CGIAR's system as having excluded farmers totally from the trusteeship, a system being linked with the GSV which will give the CGIAR 'almost exclusive' access to the vault's deposits.

Accessions from India and Asia are part of the collections from India's Rice Research Institute and from the Hyderabad-based International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), under the aegis of CGIAR, that are to be locked in the GSV. "This vault is more the need of the life-sciences industry, known for its 'pirating' of farmers' material and traditional knowledge," said GRAIN's Bhutani.

An ICRISAT press note says that the organisation's participation in the duplicate conservation of seeds in the vault gives increased protection to global agriculture from climate change. But the seeds or germplasm to be transferred by ICRISAT are those of hardy dryland sorghum, pearl millet, chickpea, pigeonpea, groundnut and six small millets that can withstand climate change.

Bhutani says that there are methods of conservation that should be adopted along with this strategy, adding that there is nothing on offer to believe that Svalbard will be invincible in its protection.

ICRISAT has given examples of protection offered through its 1,400-odd genebanks currently in operation in various countries. It says sorghum germplasm lost during civil wars in Ethiopia and Rwanda was replenished from the collection stored in its genebanks.

GRAIN recommends that governments first support their national farmers and markets, rather than international gene banks, leaving seeds in the hands of local farmers with their innovative farming and seed-exchange practices. Developing countries with agro-biodiversity assets need to safeguard their farmers' interests before agreeing to corporate-controlled agricultural agreements, it said.

Fowler said the GCDT endorses the view that ex-situ and in-situ conservation are complementary.

(END/2008)

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