COMMUNITY SEED AND FOOD FAIRS IN MALAWI
Spaces for the Interchange of Seed, Knowledge, and Culture

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KEY POINTS

• Seed and food fairs function as agrobiodiversity and knowledge exchange sites.

• These fairs are hubs for spreading information about agroecology.

• Seed and food fairs are platforms that facilitate seed exchange and allow for Farmers’ Rights to be realised in practice.

• The best seed and food fairs are those which have multiple purposes. Through the display of local crops, vegetables, fruits, food, and agricultural implements, learning is facilitated, and farmers are able to realise an income.

• Seed and food fairs benefit from external support. Community seed banks can provide infrastructure and technical know-how around seed propagation and selection; while government departments can help to mobilise farmers and provide organisational support.

• Hosting a seed and food fair requires a high level of organisation. The establishment of committees that oversee activities underscores the success of the event.
INTRODUCTION

Introduced by civil society organisations, seed and food fairs are a regular feature on the calendars of farmers working with the Biodiversity Conservation Initiative (BCI) in northern Malawi. Frequently held on the premises of a community seed bank (CSB), these events provide a space for smallholder farmers to display the diversity of crops, fruits, and vegetables they grow, alongside wild harvested edible and medicinal species.

Mostly attended by farmers and other community members, the fairs also attract government officials from not only the Ministry of Agriculture, but also the Ministries of Education; Health; and Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare. The fair’s guest of honour will most likely be drawn from the ranks of these officials or from local leaders such as traditional authorities and ward councillors.

Although not a “traditional” intervention, seed and food fairs in northern Malawi have evolved into important cultural events. In this briefing document we will discuss what it takes to organise a successful seed and food fair and examine the benefits which may arise from holding such an event.³

HOSTING A SEED AND FOOD FAIR

A substantial amount of planning precedes a seed and food fair. Working closely with the community in question, BCI discusses the activities on offer, and draws up a work plan which will be presented to the various village-based committees involved. After an organising committee is established, sub-committees for elements such as registration of seeds, entertainment, security, and catering are put in place.

Next steps include deciding on a venue and selecting a theme for the fair. Themes tend to focus on the importance of seed diversity in achieving household food and nutrition security as well as conferring rural resilience to climate change.

³ The information in this brief is based on an interview with Isaiah Phiri, field officer at BCI and a mini-survey conducted with five farmers associated with BCI.
Invitees and the entertainment on offer will be discussed. Together with officers from the Ministry of Agriculture, BCI will set up a multidisciplinary group of judges to assess the seed and food on display. To avoid bias, judges are sourced from areas outside the area in which the seed and food fair is held.

With support from government through assistance with organisational matters and mobilising farmers, the coordinating team will set about sending out invitations, including to traditional leaders from the area, local councillors, and the Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture. Posters advertising the fair will also be distributed.

A typical seed and food fair starts in the morning, guests go round, appreciating the seeds, vegetables, fruits, and processing equipment on display. Guests are treated to delicious food made from the fresh produce and are entertained by dances and drama.

The displays are arranged by crop and each exhibit is marked with the farmer’s name and their village. The identification helps a farmer when retrieving his or her seed at the end of the day but also makes it easy for the judges to name prize winners. Visitors are treated to a large diversity of seeds, including: maize, beans, amaranths, bambara nuts, okra, pumpkin, gourds, calabash; oil crops such as sesame and castor seed; spices; and roots and tubers such as sweet potatoes, yams and cassava; fruits such as cucumber, water melons, goron tula (Azanza garckeana) and wild medlar (Vangueria infausta); and “weeds” such as blackjack and cat’s whiskers. The guests are free to buy whatever is on offer.
THE VALUE OF SEED AND FOOD FAIRS

Seed and food fairs confer multiple benefits

Seed and food fairs can have direct value – such as the opportunity to buy or exchange seed; taste traditional foods; or learn about processing methods. Other benefits are less direct, but equally - or arguably more - important, such as contributing to nutrition and food security, and keeping traditional practices alive. Seed and food fair events also help farmers to strengthen and extend their networks, as remarked one farmer, a member of the Chikwawa CSB:

“... during seed and food fairs I make friendships with other farmers that attend, with these I exchange mobile phone numbers and we are able to visit each other”

One of the key benefits brought about by seed and food fairs is the ability to extend the diversity within a farmer’s seed collection. A farmer from Baliro CSB observed:

“... during seed and food fairs you find seed that you do not have, when you collect these, your seed diversity increases”

Farmers also expressed their pleasure at being able to win farming implements at the fairs. According to a farmer from Baliro CSB:

“Another benefit is prizes that I win from the fairs, it has been many years since I last bought farming implements such as hoes because I still have those I won from seed and food fairs"
Seed and food fairs foster beneficial NGO-government collaborations

BCI’s work on seed and food fairs complements that of the government, as both government and BCI work with the same role-players, namely the custodians of agrobiodiversity. Both are also concerned with enhancing their household nutrition and food security.

Recognising these positive developments, government assists through mobilising farmers and making sure that extension workers attend alongside officials from various ministries.

Seed and fairs strengthen links with community seed banks

There are strong links between seed and food fairs and CSBs. Since seed and food fairs are often held at CSB premises, the CSBs act as an extension of an awareness platform, as some visiting farmers may come from afar where they do not have a CSB. In many cases the CSB and seed and food fair are inextricably linked as most of the seed on display at the fair will be sourced from the seed bank. Seed banks, through seed and food fairs, provide platforms where farmers exercise their rights to save, sell and exchange seed as provided for in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Seed and food fairs furthermore provide opportunities to collect, conserve and multiply unique crops, making it possible for CSBs to collect unique and rare seed.
CONCLUSION

For this briefing document small-scale farmers in northern Malawi were asked the following question: “How does it feel to see your seed, food, or vegetables on display at a seed and food fair?”. A farmer from Baliro CSB responded:

“I feel very happy because other farmers learn that there are some farmers who have some scarce farmers’ varieties and I feel happy when farmers learn how to cook the foods I displayed.”

This quote sums up the seed and food fair experiences of farmers associated with BCI – the fairs provide spaces of learning, sites of seed collection and exchange for multiplication, and a place of pride for farmers sharing the traditional knowledge and practices which underpin health, as well as food and nutrition security.
The Seed and Knowledge Initiative
The Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) was formed in 2013 and has grown to include 15 partner organisations across South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia. The initiative comprises a dynamic partnership of diverse southern African organisations committed to securing food sovereignty in the region. Partners work with smallholder farmers to become more seed, food and nutritionally secure through farmer-led seed systems, improved crop diversity, and the revival of local knowledge systems.
https://www.seedandknowledge.org/

Biodiversity Conservation Initiative
Based in Mzuzu, Malawi, the non-profit Biodiversity Conservation Initiative (BCI) aims to support community development through conservation and sustainable use of local biological resources. Currently, BCI is supporting four CSBs in Rumphi District. This is being done through the collection, evaluation, and multiplication of locally-adapted germplasm. Sharing of the multiplied germplasm is facilitated by the CSBs through seed loans.
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The NRF/DSI SARChI Chair on the Bio-economy
Based in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science at the University of Cape Town (UCT), the Bio-economy Chair aims to deepen understanding of the environmental, political, and social dynamics of the bio-economy. The Chair works towards inspiring a scholarship that explores possibilities for socially just and environmentally sustainable approaches, with a particular focus on the Global South. Building a critical mass of intellectual capacity among postgraduate students, the Chair also informs policy and public debate.
www.bio-economy.org.za

The Development Fund of Norway
The Development Fund of Norway has been working in Malawi since 2006 in thematic areas such as climate change adaptation, agrobiodiversity conservation, seed banks, and crop diversification. In terms of agrobiodiversity conservation, the Development Fund has supported BCI to work on farmer-led seed systems through CSBs in Rumphi District in northern Malawi since 2013.
https://www.utviklingsfondet.no

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Photographs: Isaiah Phiri