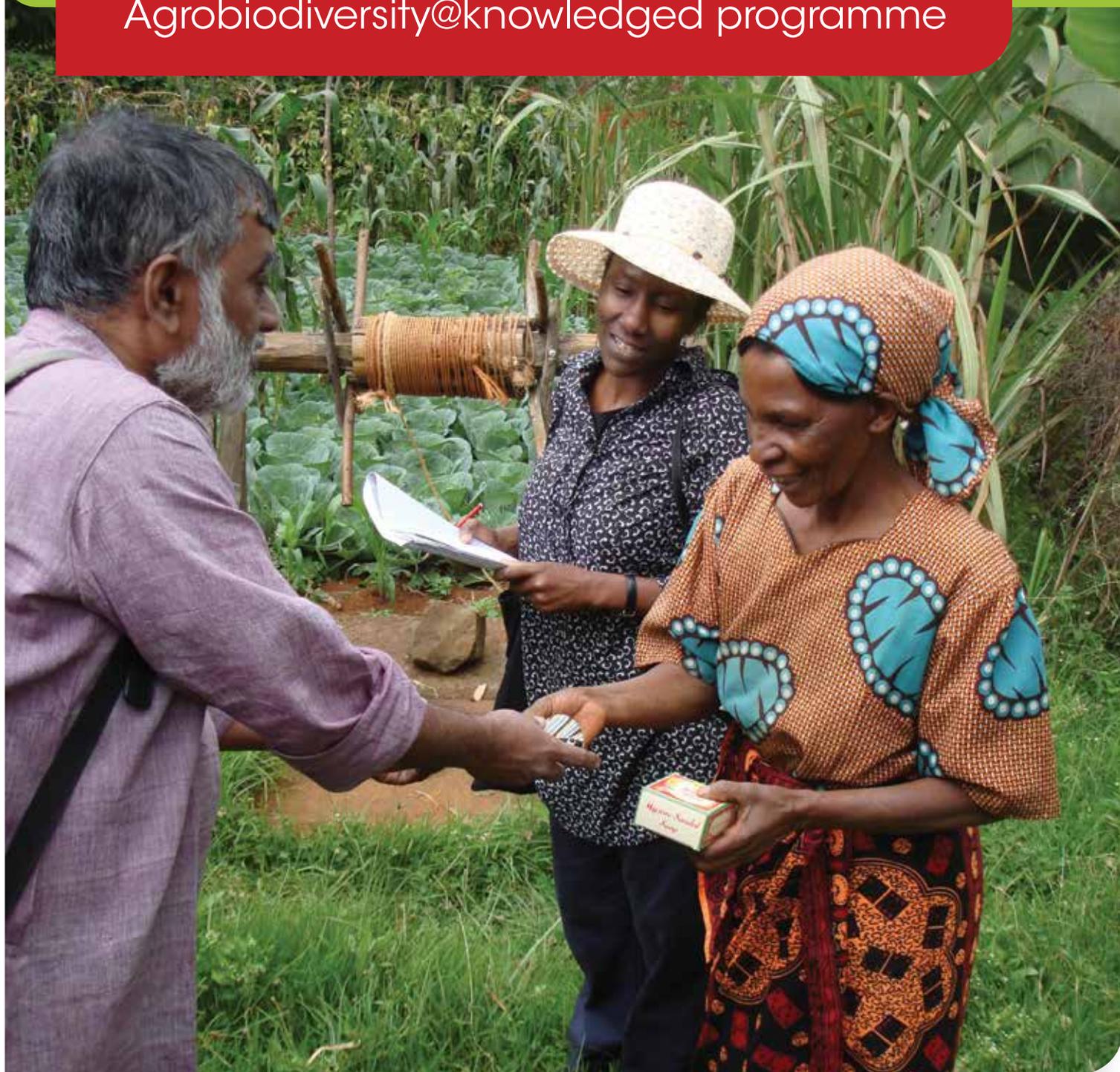


The diversity of knowledge

Reflections on the
Agrobiodiversity@knowledged programme



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Preface

Despite its importance for food security, smallholder livelihoods and the environment, agricultural biodiversity is disappearing at an alarming rate and with it the knowledge embedded in its management and use. With the Agrobiodiversity@Knowledge Programme, Hivos and Oxfam Novib wanted to contribute to solutions for this unfolding drama.

This report is the result of a three years knowledge programme of Hivos, Oxfam Novib and civil society organisations and academics working in the field of agricultural biodiversity around the world. It reveals stories of change - changes within people and changes within the programmes of their organisations - related to agricultural biodiversity.

For 10 years, before the programme, we ran the Hivos-Oxfam Novib Biodiversity Fund, supporting international civil society organisations working on agrobiodiversity in its broadest sense. It revealed lots of knowledge available within civil society on the benefits of agrobiodiversity based farming systems. So far most research has focused on improving productivity of a limited number of crops. The results of this approach are now surfacing. After years of public and private led intensification in agriculture, supported by huge amounts of financial and human resources, agrobiodiversity is quickly disappearing. However, a large percentage of the farmers in resource poor regions of the world continue to depend on the seeds and breeds in their own fields and surroundings, and do not receive much research or state support. They are the custodians of diversity. Instead of celebrating these farmers and recognising their work, they are depicted as backward and often pushed into a monoculture oriented farming system.

While the Biodiversity Fund helped to create islands of success and understanding, it lacked the instruments to make initiatives of agrobiodiversity come to scale. The question arose what else was needed to break the glasshouse around agricultural biodiversity, as we started referring to it back in 2012.

We started exploring the possibility of a 'knowledge for change' programme. In collaboration with the Stockholm Resilience Centre, we used a resilience theory approach to identify areas in which key civil society actors can act as bridges between



Photo: Hivos / Oxfam Novib

Participants of the ABC meeting at Thika, Kenya.

different knowledge paradigms and levels of intervention. It helped us to better understand what needed to happen: indeed, it was not so much the technical knowledge that was lacking to start 'breaking the glasshouse', but rather the transformational process guided by this technical knowledge.

A brainstorming meeting in Thika (Kenya 2012) resulted in the rough contours of a knowledge programme to co-create and broker knowledge to catalyse a transformation towards biodiverse, resilient and just food systems. In the three years that followed we co-created the Agricultural Biodiversity Community (ABC) which became the heart of the programme, and was catalysed by its annual meetings.

Each in their own way, the community members are all frontrunners on agricultural biodiversity. They are stepping into the future with ideas built on their vast knowledge of local realities of millions of smallholder farmers. Enabling people to move forward is for us the largest achievement of this programme.

We now know much more about how change happens. We know that nurturing a process of transformation is a skill in itself that merits reflection. This document contributes to such reflection. It is not meant to be an evaluation. Rather, the aim is twofold: (1) to learn from the experiences of programme partners; and (2) to make these insights available to others with an interest in both knowledge for social change and knowledge development around agrobiodiversity.

It is our hope that the valuable insights in this document will contribute to the knowledge of how best to work with the world's great biodiversity in order to develop and maintain healthy and sustainable food systems. Both Hivos and Oxfam Novib remain committed to support these goals. We will continue to work on farmers' seed systems, on transformational methodologies and on diversity as the basis for future food systems. And so will many of the members of the community.

We would like to thank Janneke Bruil and Henkjan Laats for producing this lessons learned document with us. The insights presented here draw from interviews with participants of the programme. In their own voices, the interviewees explain how they have communicated and shared knowledge, what their personal learnings were, and how they have used these in their interactions with others. They also reflect on the programme methodology and processes, and the difficulties they faced as 'transformers' of knowledge.

In addition, we would like to thank all interviewees. Their stories show how the ABC community and the annual meetings have helped them move forward, to feel part of a larger community and how the meetings have brought inner leadership capacities.

A big thank you also to Sarah Doornbos who was our energetic, analytical and thought provoking colleague for the larger part of the Agrobiodiversity@knowledged programme period.

And most importantly, we wholeheartedly thank all ABC members for being part of this inspiring journey. We are excited to see the community already continuing its path into the future.

On behalf of Hivos and Oxfam Novib,



Carol Gribnau
Green Society Programme Director
Hivos



Ton Meijers
Head, Programme Support and Impact
Oxfam Novib

1. Building a knowledge programme on agrobiodiversity

Building on experiences and partnerships developed in the context of the Biodiversity Fund since 2000, Hivos and Oxfam Novib continued their collaboration in a three-year knowledge programme on agricultural biodiversity. Conceptually, it was based on a report from the Stockholm Resilience Centre that identified knowledge constraints related to the role of agricultural biodiversity for smallholder farmers' livelihoods. Based on this work and the feedback of a group of organisations during a meeting in Thika, Kenya in 2012, the Agrobiodiversity@knowledged programme (A@K) started off.

It took place from 2012 to 2015. At the heart of the programme are its members around the world, also referred to as the *agricultural biodiversity community* (ABC): a global knowledge and experience network with members from practitioner organisations mostly from the global south, and international research institutions.



Photo: Sarah Merriman/AgriCultures Network
Resilient farming systems encourage diversity, such as in vertical gardening in Kenya.

The aims of the programme

The goal of the A@K knowledge programme was to *break through the glasshouse* that limits the scaling up, institutional embedding and horizontal extension of practices building on agricultural biodiversity for resilient farming systems and livelihoods. It would do so by synthesising knowledge from local to global scales. It would conduct research on approaches and analytical frameworks that provide new perspectives on agricultural biodiversity and its role in resilient socio-ecological food systems, as well as improve horizontal and vertical knowledge flows towards positive change and transformation.

The Agrobiodiversity@knowledged programme added a 'd' to the word knowledge in order to emphasise the importance of the acknowledgement of agrobiodiversity.

The programme considered that scaling up of agricultural biodiversity activities at the genetic, production system and landscape level can happen through replication, and by uptake in government and/or private sector policies and practices. However, broader scale transformation is not happening. So the programme wanted to explore questions such as: What is hindering this broader transformation, and how can we build leverage to allow change to happen?

The strategies of the programme

To tackle these questions, a strategic framework was developed at the beginning of the programme that included influencing policies, practices, the private sector, and public opinion. The programme aimed to improve both internal and external knowledge flows, to get a better understanding of the glasshouse, scaling up and transformation. To help with this process, communication tools were selected and designed, such as dedicated Hivos and Oxfam Novib webpages, and a special agrobiodiversity related issue of Farming Matters magazine. These tools started to develop the agricultural biodiversity community, bringing together a diverse group of people and experimenting with different communication tools such as the d-group, a digital discussion group. There was regular interaction among the members of the agricultural biodiversity community. Four annual meetings took place, in Kenya (2011), Thailand (2012), India (2013) and the Netherlands (2014). In addition, there were various smaller strategy meetings among some of the participants, and participation in major events such as Rio+20, meetings around the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Outside of these events, members communicated regularly via the internet.

“how can we build leverage for broader transformation?”

The Embassy of the Earth played a specific role in building the community, as can be read in various interviews. Furthermore, the programme’s strategic framework included research to improve the understanding of key programme themes, which culminated in three working groups: open source seed systems, resilience and policy influence.

The programme also supported seven concrete initiatives of members, which were selected for their potential to achieve change, to be replicated and to inspire others. These projects developed and used instruments to improve awareness of the importance of agrobiodiversity, and included an award programme, open access information sharing, and open source seed approaches.

Currently the community members are in the process of finding ways to continue the agricultural biodiversity community, including through a follow-up strategy meeting in Africa in 2015.



Communication and knowledge sharing are vital tools in scaling up agrobiodiversity.

Photo: Jian Ren/AgriCultures Network

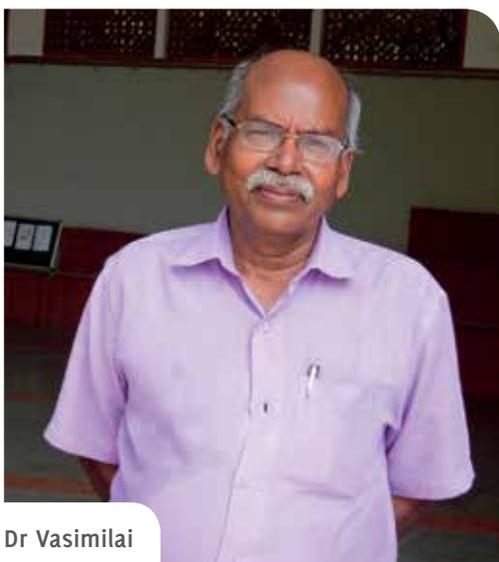
2. Twelve perspectives

Twelve interviews were held with programme partners. Together they present a colourful insight into the types of knowledge sharing that have taken place in the agricultural biodiversity community (ABC). The emerging picture can be regarded as a vivid sample of emerging patterns of knowledge sharing within the community.

In order to capture the lessons learned, we asked questions such as: What were your expectations? What was your role in the community? What is it that makes the ABC community special? What value does it add to already existing local, regional and global networks with similar purpose? What are the concrete results of knowledge sharing and creation within the community? What are your suggestions for the future?

From a loose network towards a self regulated and self financed community

An interview with Dr Vasimalai - *Dhan Foundation, India*



Dr Vasimalai

Photo: Edith van Walsum

Dr Vasimalai founded the Dhan Foundation in 1997. Dhan Foundation's core business is building local institutions from the ground up. Dhan reaches some 1.5 million small scale and marginal farmers, most of them in southern India. Dhan's main activity in agrobiodiversity is its involvement in various projects to test and multiply diverse minor millet varieties with farmers.

What is your association with the ABC?

The Dhan Foundation's major contribution to the ABC is to articulate the institutional development process dimension of the ABC. When Oxfam Novib and Hivos started the Agrobiodiversity@knowledge programme, I saw this as an opportunity to learn from other people and organisations in different continents. It appealed to me that the community was not driven by the institutional interests of its members but by a joint belief in the importance of knowledge building in relation to agrobiodiversity. A loose network emerged, and one of its strengths was that none of the members tried to control the network.

What is the added value of the ABC?

I knew generally about the importance of agrobiodiversity but became stimulated to think more about the principles behind it, the conceptual issues. This is necessary if we want to break the glasshouse and connect more effectively with each other. The aim of ABC is to create ripples in the mainstream of agricultural development, but this is not the same as advocacy. We engage with policy makers, but we also engage with the entire society around us. Breaking the glasshouse is thus about shaking up the total system, not only about influencing some policy makers. We draw inspiration from Gandhi, who said that the government is an exploiter. Our aim is to unleash people's power.

The ABC has also created ripples in the Dhan Foundation. The first ABC meeting took place when Dhan was preparing its 2012-2016 strategic plan. Inspired by the meeting, we decided to add a biodiversity objective to Dhan's overall objectives.

What can you say about the processes and people that inspired you most?

Whereas the first ABC meeting in Kenya was mainly about breaking the glasshouse, from the second meeting onwards we started building a more cohesive focus, with Frank Heckman of the Embassy of the Earth as facilitator. I enjoyed working with him. His exercises and methodology were refreshing.

The Stockholm Resilience Centre was an important voice in the community. Their overview paper on resilience and agrobiodiversity added a conceptual dimension to our understanding of upscaling agrobiodiversity. Still we struggle to make the link between this conceptual level of thinking and our realities on the ground, but at least we have been stimulated to think about the larger system. SEARICE (an NGO from the Philippines) has been another active and important voice in the community. They brought in a lot of practical experience and were articulate. LI-BIRD (Nepal) and Bioversity International (global) also brought in relevant experience. Patrick Mulvany shared his knowledge about the history of agrobiodiversity which was helpful for understanding the larger picture. Our own Dhan Foundation's core competency in linking practice to policy was also brought into the group.

What are your reflections about the ABC?

We discussed theories and overviews, not so much the practical examples and evidence. We need to bring these out much more clearly. For example, we talked about scaling up, mainly indirectly, as a challenge for the future. I brought the institutional part of the ABC to the table which I think is important if we want to continue ABC and make it a successful knowledge sharing community. One of the challenges is that we don't write down our own organisation's experiences, as documentation is not part of our organisational culture, and most of our organisations have this problem. The challenge is: How do we bring out good practices? How do we get our treasures out of the black box and share them with the global network, and beyond? How do we make what excites us visible to others?

**“Our aim is to
unleash people's
power”**

Our different competencies together helped in building the community and in developing our thinking about agrobiodiversity. These were unusual interactions, as we were so diverse. We hardly shared our own concrete experiences but together we did develop a joint analysis. We succeeded in formulating a vision statement and core strategies for the ABC, which made me very happy. But the challenge remains: how do we retain our new insights and energies and take them further in our own arenas? For instance, can we agree to allocate 5-10% of our total budget to agrobiodiversity and take this as a point of departure for continuing a joint ABC community?

Can you share your perspectives for the future?

In the India meeting in 2013 we already started talking about the future, including the institutional development of the ABC. But there has not been a systematic follow-up. Sarah Doornbos of Hivos who had earlier played a critical role in reminding ABC members about commitments made, etc., moved on to another job and we did experience a vacuum.

However, to fill this vacuum, a steering committee has been formed consisting so far of four people including myself. This committee is developing ideas on how to transform ABC into a natural and vibrant community; to look again at the purpose statement, the terms of reference of ABC's steering committee and secretariat; the efforts needed to ensure continuity and sustenance for the next one or two years, and the sharing of responsibilities with other ABC members. In the next ABC meeting, which hopefully will take place at the end of 2015, this agenda will be taken further.

With its extensive experience in institution building, the Dhan Foundation is looking forward to playing a key role in the transformation process of ABC from an event-driven network to a community/member-driven, self regulated and self-financing community.

Building a community, going on a journey

An interview with Frank Heckman – *Embassy of the Earth, the Netherlands*



Maarten Bruns (left) and Frank Heckman (right)

Frank Heckman from the Netherlands is the founder of the Embassy of the Earth, based on the guiding principle of 'One earth is enough for the whole world'. Within the neutral space of the Embassy people can meet, search and share to help solve complex issues. It comprises of a pool of experienced social designers, artists, communicators and indigenous leaders who are ready to go where help is needed and bring in their expertise.

Photo: personal collection Frank Heckman

What is your role in the ABC?

Because of our experience, methodology and philosophy, Hivos and Oxfam Novib requested Maarten Bruns who also works for the Embassy of the Earth and me to lend support in building the ABC community, including guiding the annual meetings. We were hired as consultants, although in practice I participated as one of the community members. My main purpose was to help the participants of this knowledge program achieve real and practical results through unleashing the spirit and power of the community. I perceive this as a journey, but being a consultant who was hired for specific tasks only; it was difficult to accompany the process in a continuous way. Most of my involvement occurred just before, during and after the meetings. Currently, I do not get any financing from the ABC, but still participate actively in its development.

What were some of the success factors in building the ABC community?

The community consists of people coming from diverse institutional and social cultures. There was a need for sharing knowledge, because often, the members involved in the issues of agricultural biodiversity feel isolated. Many members also expressed a wish to sit at the table with decision makers.

The work with the ABC was a participatory process, not top-down, and with honest conversations. Trust was a key issue. People needed time before they were willing to share information and knowledge. In a good community, people are willing to give, and this is what we saw in the ABC. A comfortable setting for a meeting, including, housing, tranquility, surroundings and food, is crucial for the construction of trust, the willingness to give, the ability to think and feel, and the possibility for good communication. Therefore, the annual meetings took place in basic and peaceful venues: an ashram in Thailand, a rural setting in India, and an organic agricultural centre in the Netherlands, with suitable places to meet, for physical exercises, to rest, and with delicious and healthy food. For example, in Thailand the participants tried some 16 varieties of rice.

The workshops had a sacred place (for silence, meditation, storytelling, cooking together, and music), a shared place, a work space and a world space. There was always a fire burning and there was a continuous connection with the soil. This is an important aspect, because especially office-based people often forget this connection. I like to say that ‘Our link with the Earth is bigger than us’ which explains why the settings are important in order to optimise cognitive capacities. We needed to achieve something, but the construction of the community was our most important aim.

“In a good community, people are willing to give”

What is your view on the results of the community?

At first there was only few communications during the periods in between the workshops, but the community became stronger during the course of the programme. A common ground was constructed that serves as a defense shield from agroindustry for individuals and organisations that promote agricultural diversity. A concrete result of the community’s joint work is a very strong common vision, and the joint forces contributed towards influencing policy of the FAO, as well as of governments in Africa and India. Another example is how, in our last workshop in Boxtel, an unobtrusive participant from Pakistan explained, to my surprise, that he had applied the methodology of community building in several communities in his home country. And there are many more outcomes.

The ABC is an example of a community that becomes active when something really needs to happen. It is a community based on a real need, and with a real performance. Sometimes the fire burns strongly, and at other moments one needs to have patience and to try to keep the fire burning. Taking into account the current context of, for example, the monopolisation of seed distribution, the community not only exchanges knowledge (about climate change resistant rice varieties, etc.), but is also sometimes forced to undertake acts of civil disobedience, going against rules that prohibit the use of diverse seeds. An important challenge of the ABC is to prepare itself for the future. I am convinced that the era of large monocropping agroindustries will soon be finished, and that agricultural diversity and agroecology will become the main strategies to feed the world.

The programme allowed members of the ABC to mobilise globally. The ABC, as a cross section of organisations that are concerned about the protection of biodiversity, was able to create a movement that has continued to work together to find practical solutions for sustainable biodiversity.

Scaling-up a local experience

An interview with Elizabeth Katushabe - *Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA), Uganda*



“The programme helped to create momentum for change at a global level”

Elizabeth Katushabe

Photo: PENHA

Elizabeth Katushabe is a woman farmer, born and brought up among the Bahima community keeping Ankole Longhorn Cattle (ALHC) in Uganda. She is a member of the Ankole Cow Conservation Association which is campaigning for ways to ensure that this great indigenous breed does not become extinct. She owns 50 pure Ankole Longhorn cattle on family land in Kijumba, in Nakaseke district, in the central part of the cattle corridor of Uganda. Elizabeth volunteers as the Projects Officer of the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA) based in Uganda, an NGO that is mainly concerned with the future of pastoralists in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Somaliland, and Uganda. In Uganda, PENHA focuses on the social and economic empowerment of pastoral and agro-pastoralist women.

Your initiative was one of the seven financed by the programme.

What did you do and what were the results?

I was supported by the programme to carry out a study on LIFE approaches in India. The LIFE method is a conceptual framework developed by the League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development (LPP), using participatory and flexible means to understand indigenous breeds from the owners' perspective. The goal of the initiative was to collate evidence from projects by LIFE network partners in India that have used indigenous animal genetic resources as starting points for their interventions, and to analyse their impacts on livestock keepers and on biodiversity. In collaboration with the LPP, and with financial support from the A@K programme, the LIFE approach in India was studied and the outcomes were compiled in a report. This report was used to influence the Global Agenda of action towards sustainable livestock development. I also presented the results of the study at meeting on the Global Agenda in Cali, Colombia. Based on this research, and with support from colleagues, I authored 'Reviving the Ankole Longhorns of Uganda', an article published in Farming Matters, March 2014.

What is your view on the knowledge sharing aspects of the ABC community?

I have travelled around, lived and worked in different parts of Uganda, Africa, as well as in Asia and Europe, and have interacted with stakeholders in small scale livestock keeping and pastoralism and agro-pastoralism. I have worked with veterinarians, ethno-medicinal scientists, politicians, development workers and organisations. This has helped me to appreciate the importance of knowledge sharing for small scale livestock keeping and pastoralism, and for food security, conserving biodiversity, social-economic development and livelihood improvement.

The programme helped to create momentum for change towards recognition of agricultural biodiversity at a global level. It has also strengthened like-minded organisations worldwide in becoming a professional action-learning community for agricultural biodiversity. Furthermore, the programme brought together different organisations to engage with other stakeholders to identify blind spots in its work, and to share experiences and perspectives. I think we recognise that the members have effectively become a community and fostered a spirit of working and learning together. We are now trying to find a way of continuing too in that spirit.

Learning from practical experience

An interview with Michael Commons - *Earth Net* and *Green Net*, Thailand



Michael Commons

Photo: personal collection Michael Commons

Michael Commons moved from the USA to Thailand 12 years ago. He works for two organisations: Earth Net and Green Net. Earth Net is a foundation, its main objective being to promote and support initiatives related to the production, processing, marketing and consumption of organic food, natural products and ecological handicrafts. Green Net is a social enterprise working to link sustainable farmers and community enterprises with consumers, focusing on the promotion of organic agriculture and the development of alternative fair markets. Michael is a native English speaker and speaks fluent Thai, and supported several ABC members in the editing of articles for Farming Matters magazine.

Could you share some of your main learnings within the ABC community?

I 'jumped' into the ABC after being the host of the second A@K meeting, in 2012. I believe that Green Net and Earth Net contributed to the ABC by sharing its experience on agricultural diversity. More diversity is more resilient. For example, there is salt resistant rice, flood resistant rice and drought resistance rice. And we work with more than a hundred edible and medicinal plant species. Helping to edit some of the articles for Farming Matters was definitely a case of mutual learning. One of the articles in Farming Matters was about an experience of the CENESTA, the Centre for Sustainable Development in Iran about a model that has given a large

“To continue knowledge sharing, there should be regular communication”

number of farmers access to a great amount of biodiversity in a relatively short time: Evolutionary Plant Breeding (EPB). A dynamic and inexpensive strategy, EPB rapidly enhances the adaptation of farmers' crops to climate change. In EPB, farmers plant a large mixture of hundreds or thousands of different varieties, and do not necessarily aim to choose, or use, a single variety. I was so inspired by this story. Now I am looking for possibilities to apply EPB for rice, though this will be difficult because rice is not as

suitable for EPB as compared to barley in the Iranian case. One problem is that rice varieties flower at different times, while barley varieties tend to flower at the same time.

Furthermore, I learned a lot from other activities in the community, such as the resilience assessment exercises, from storytelling and from the possibilities of mapping. Another inspirational subject was the influencing of policies, especially from the contributions of Patrick Mulvany.

How do you see the future of the ABC?

The main benefit of the community is knowledge sharing, and to continue that there should be regular communication. Those involved in the themes of open source seeds and resilience will continue their information sharing, but there are many more issues to address. Personally, I am committed to put in a lot of effort in continuing the ABC. We will continue loosely or less loosely in the future exchange of knowledge, though I do see some major challenges, for example the need to involve more youth and more Latin American members.



Photo: personal collection Michael Commons

Agricultural biodiversity and markets

An interview with Maryleen Micheni - *Participatory Ecological Land Use Management Association (PELUM), Kenya*



Maryleen Micheni

Photo: personal collection Maryleen Micheni

Maryleen Micheni works for the Kenyan chapter of Participatory Ecological Land Use Management association (PELUM), a network of civil society organizations working in 12 countries in eastern, southern and central Africa. Members of the network work with smallholder farming communities in the areas of ecological land use management and sustainable agriculture practices. PELUM carries out thematic technical training for field and extension officers on subjects such as approaches of sustainable farming technologies, biodiversity, and ecological land use management practices. Their advocacy work is focused on ensuring that implemented policies favour small scale farmers. Maryleen Micheni hosted the first meeting of the A@K programme, and is part of the steering committee that has already formulated plans for the future functioning of the ABC.

“It has been enriching to share challenges and hear how they were addressed elsewhere”

In your view, what were the most important results of the ABC?

It has been very enriching to share our work with like-minded organizations, to learn from the experiences of others, to share challenges we have experienced and hear how they have been addressed elsewhere, to network, become inspired, build partnerships, and to join forces and work together in common focus areas with the other ABC members.

As a result of continued interactions we have since made contacts with other members of the ABC community, specifically with the Africa Center for Biosafety, the Ruzivo Trust and ZOPPA in Zimbabwe. Let me give you one concrete example of the results. During the meeting in Thailand, Green Net shared their incubation programme for youth. PELUM Kenya borrowed from those experiences and we are now implementing a market incubation programme with Kenyan youth for the next two years, up to 2016, fundamentally inspired on Green Net’s approach.

We also learned and shared around markets and trade, focusing on how to produce and promote products of agricultural biodiversity sources, while understanding the dynamics involved in such delicate production and marketing systems. There was, for example, the sharing of a case study by the Kapkuikui Livestock Self Help Group (KLSHG) of honey from the agro-marketing model. The results were published in Farming Matters magazine.

What are your expectations for the future of ABC?

Currently, we are exploring a joint engagement on seed conservation from the African perspective, with several African members of the ABC, but this is yet to be finalised. It is one of initiatives that need continuation now that the programme has ended.

Resilience and learning from the grassroots

An interview with Jamila Haider - *Stockholm Resilience Center, Sweden*

Jamila Haider works for the Stockholm Resilience Centre, carrying out research on the governance of socio-ecological systems with a special emphasis on resilience. The Centre applies and further develops the scientific advancements of this research in regards to practice, policy, and academic training. Within the Stockholm Resilience Centre, Jamila Haider also works part of her time for SwedBio, a knowledge interface working for resilient ecosystem management and governance through policy and methodology development, facilitating dialogue, contributing to strategic programmes in developing countries, and learning from international partners, scientists and others.

Photo: personal collection Jamila Haider



Jamila Haider

Can you give an example of knowledge sharing within the ABC?

One of the examples that for me best explains how we shared knowledge in the ABC is the workshop on resilience assessment for agricultural biodiversity at the last ABC meeting in the Netherlands in 2014. In the first session many participants said: we don't need a resilience assessment tool, as we already do this in our communities and the last thing we need are external perspectives on what to do. So, we threw our facilitation plans out of the window. But as it turned out, in another session, many participants asked 'what is resilience anyway?' Two farmers from the ABC community, Kanya Duchita from Thailand and Elizabeth Katushabe from Uganda, explained that it is an English word and concept, but might not be used by them or their communities.

To understand better what is resilience in agriculturally biodiverse landscapes, we listened to the narrative of Elizabeth, who rears Ankole cattle, and the group drew this story on large sheets of paper. She told us how if she loses one cow due to some misfortune, her community will give her five in return. And she will of course do the same if something happens to her friends' cattle. Our Thai friend Kanya, told us (jokingly) that she practices agroforestry because 'she is lazy' and it is so easy to let fruit and vegetables grow without her input. Her livelihood depends entirely on her forest, but in a community context, she depends on the connections she has with her extended family and neighbours who all specialise in different products and share their wealth with each other. Finally, our Indian colleague led a narrative of why we need to assess resilience.

“At the end, we had an understanding of what we valued in the community, and what made it healthy and strong”

We broke down the 'why', 'how' and 'what' of resilience assessment. We came to a shared understanding that what we wanted was self-assessment by communities, for communities to (a) identify and monitor sources and the status of resilience in their communities for themselves, and (b) in some contexts, to communicate to external actors and to possibly avoid inappropriate development interventions.

Our next steps as a group were to use the drawings to pick out attributes that were important to the custodians of the landscape. At the end, we had an understanding of what we valued in this community, and what made it healthy and strong.

The ABC Community is now in the process of pulling together resources to enrich this tool with the expertise of the members of the group, for example, with 'eco-mapping' from MELCA in Ethiopia, and with community mapping from SEARICE. We are preparing the [web-launch](#) of this enriched tool which will link to other great resources such as the Resilience Assessment workbook, a new E-learning course on resilience assessment by SwedBio to be launched soon. Many of us left the workshop saying that we had achieved much more than we had ever expected. Farmers and practitioners said that this is definitely a tool that they can use in their communities. We hope to start field trials in Thailand, Uganda, South Africa, Peru, India and other countries soon and look forward to hearing from anyone else who is interested.

As an academic, what was your role in the ABC Community?

As a researcher studying resilience in agricultural biodiverse landscapes, I left thinking that we reached a milestone in co-creating a process that is accessible to communities, making a contribution by aggregating existing tools that assess resilience in agricultural biodiverse contexts, and moving towards a specified assessment. We look forward to connecting this to the many other ongoing initiatives assessing resilience.

On a personal note, I found the workshop very challenging, but incredibly rewarding. Despite dedicating my work to smallholders, being a lover and advocate of wheats, millets, pulses and everything else, at the end of the day I am a young Northern female scientist. And my voice, especially at the beginning without any personal trust behind it, held little legitimacy in this context, though I wouldn't want it any other way. But it makes it very difficult to contribute, let alone facilitate a co-creative process like this. Over time, however, as we got to know each other, these barriers broke down. But it was humbling! I am so grateful for an incredible learning experience, where I also started a process of finding a space for my own voice in this critically important issue of conserving agricultural biodiversity that we all share a passion for.

Cross-cultural aspects of learning

An interview with Michael Farelly - *Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement (TOAM)*



Michael Farelly

Photo: Stephen Boustred

Michael Farelly works for the Tanzania Organic Agriculture Movement (TOAM), an umbrella organisation that coordinates and promotes the organic sector among farmers, distributors and consumers through networking and sharing knowledge. TOAM has 115 members including farmers associations and cooperatives, NGOs, organic operators, companies, distributors, researchers and trainers. Michael Farelly is also active in the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), a pan-African platform comprising regional networks and farmer organizations.

“Whether or not the ABC continues, we will continue sharing knowledge and working together”

Did the ABC support any policy related work?

Thanks to the A@K programme, TOAM and AFSA have been able to start producing a series of agroecology case studies, called ‘Making the case for agroecology’. The A@K seed funding leveraged additional resources and it is now in its third phase, with organisations from across Africa participating. The cases will be presented at FAO’s regional agroecology seminar in November in Senegal, in an effort to show how agroecology can be supported from the grassroots to policy.

From ABC members such as Patrick Mulvany, I learned a lot about influencing policy. For example why Bill Gates is doing this nonsense of supporting GMOs and the Green Revolution, in collusion with transnational companies. I very much enjoyed participating in the ABC policy group, and learn from ABC members who regularly carry out lobby activities and have a seat at the ‘captain’s table’. We learned about action planning for influencing policy and about what works and

What are some of the challenges and achievements of the ABC?

I learned a lot from other ABC members, especially those with much experience such as Andrew Mushita and Patrick Mulvany. My own contribution was my field experience and my cross-cultural role as a person who comes from the North, but having lived and worked for many years in the South. For example, when I heard the ‘breaking the glasshouse’ metaphor used by Oxfam Novib and Hivos, I thought: “Farmers in Africa don’t have glasshouses, and if they did, they certainly wouldn’t want to break them.”

Of course, there were challenges in the ABC community. In the meeting in Thailand (2012) we did a lot of planning, but afterwards hardly anybody did anything. Also, the d-group is a beautiful web platform, but few people used it.

In general, however, important knowledge sharing took place in the ABC thanks to a large extent to the valuable and innovative community building facilitated by Frank Heckman. It’s fascinating how learning, engagement and involvement have been connected. Within the ABC there were moments of South–North and North–South learning. I was, for example, amazed by a visit to a large-scale mechanised organic farm in the Netherlands. Although it works in Europe, it is a challenge to see how it could fit in the context of smallholders in Africa. There were also interesting discussions on the issue of private-public partnerships. While as Northerners we struggle to work out if and how the private sector can engage with agroecology, Africans do not necessarily look at it like that. For many Africans, agroecology just is what it is - and that is very liberating.

what doesn't work in policy advocacy. However I still see this as very much a Northern preoccupation. In Africa, policies do change, but this rarely influences village life. Africa is good at policies, but poor at implementation! One lesson from the working group was that policy is an essential, but totally insufficient condition for change. The next question is: "So what else needs to be done, and how to strengthen the voice of the people?"

The policy document elaborated in the last community meeting is very important, but the problem remains that governments say we are 'just activists'. So the question is how farmers, who often have more legitimacy than activists, can become mobilised.

What does the future hold?

Whether or not the ABC continues, the people involved will continue sharing knowledge and working together. I am not specifically focused on the theme of agricultural biodiversity, but more on the promotion of agroecology. The big question is where the agroecology movement is going. Five years ago nobody talked about agroecology, now everyone is talking about it. Monsanto will probably try to claim the term agroecology in the near future, and we should be aware of that.



Andrew Mushita

Photo: CTDO

Andrew Mushita is the executive director of the Community Technology Development Organization (CTDO), a NGO in Zimbabwe. It seeks to achieve poverty alleviation and the sustainable development of marginalised communities by building communities' and households' livelihoods capacities through research, technology innovation, technology packaging and dissemination, policy advocacy, lobbying and knowledge management, through gender-sensitive and people-centered approaches. CTDO endeavours to create a development environment where poor and vulnerable communities access a mix of alternative solutions to improving livelihoods and food security.

Scaling-up at a national, regional, continental and global level

An interview with Andrew Mushita - [Community Technology Development Organisation \(CTDO\)](#), Zimbabwe

How did your organisation work with the ABC?

I participated in the agricultural biodiversity community meetings in Thailand, India and the Netherlands, and formed part of the policy working group. Thanks to the ABC we shared knowledge and we got to know what is happening in other parts of the world. We have been able to lobby at different levels in favour of agricultural biodiversity.

What is very important, is the synergy between the ABC, and continental, regional and national networks. For example, CTDO is also a member of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), as well as another regional network with organisations from Mozambique, Swaziland, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

And based on the experience and knowledge sharing in the ABC community, CTDO jointly initiated a national Zimbabwean network on agricultural diversity, with the name ZABC! In this national network, NGOs work together with the government to elaborate a comprehensive policy on agrobiodiversity, which includes changes in the legislation. Other objectives of the network are the creation of awareness, the organisation of conferences, and the review of agricultural education curricula. The government of Zimbabwe is in favour of agrobiodiversity as a response to climate change. I believe an independent NGO such as CTDO can increase its impact, if it can influence the policies and practices of a government.

What's next for the ABC?

I shared much knowledge with the members of the ABC, and applied it in the work of CTDO, with the foundation of a national ABC in Zimbabwe as only one of the examples. This is how we add value to joint actions in local, national, regional and global networks. It is the best way to scale up and achieve major impacts. In that sense, ABC is an important network. Therefore, I hope that the ABC will continue to function, and possibly its coordination could move to the South. There are already concrete plans to organise a next ABC meeting in Africa.

“Sharing knowledge and applying it is the best way to scale up”



Photo: Shepherd Tozvireva / Oxfam Novib

CTDO facilitated Seed Fair in Goromonzi District, Zimbabwe

Amplifying the horizon

An interview with Dang Cereno – SEARICE, The Philippines



Dang Cereno

Photo: Martin van der Steen

Dang Cereno works for the Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE) promoting and implementing community-based conservation, development and sustainable use of plant genetic resources. Its strategies are advocacy, public information and research and analysis. SEARICE works in southeast Asian countries as well as Bhutan. Dang Cereno is the field coordinator for the eight countries in which SEARICE is active.

What does the ABC community have to offer to SEARICE?

SEARICE focuses specifically on the diversity of rice varieties. Because the ABC has members from many parts of the world and from different sectors, we heard many new ideas and widened our scope. I participated in the resilience group, and liked the resilience assessment approach. It is a participatory approach, a shared community process, one gets to the grassroots, and it deals with the facilitation of change. The approach is not new to SEARICE, we call it ‘community self-assessment’ and we use it all the time. What I liked in the resilience group is the shared belief of community members to undertake the assessment by themselves, rejecting outside/academic researchers doing it for them, who tell that they lack resilience because of certain indicators. In development work, outsiders really should just be facilitators, the insiders or the people in the community must actually do the job. And this is what happens when they carry out resilience assessments themselves and chart their own path to resilience.

I wanted to learn things that are different from SEARICE. We work especially in the humid Mekong watershed, so it was interesting to learn from experiences in semi-arid and arid areas. I liked the examples of the lady farmer from Thailand who showed the business side of farming, selling agricultural and processed products, and making farming a real enterprise. We need to be not only food secure, but also to be cash secure. I was also inspired by stories from Elizabeth Katushabe on longhorn cattle, as we concentrate on crops and do not pay attention to cattle. In general we shared knowledge on integrated approaches. We know this all along, but the ABC experience gave me inspiration to push within SEARICE to widen the scope of our work, beyond rice and cereal seeds, and to include other income (and food) generating activities. Rice and cereals alone are not sufficient for farmers. I also learned a lot about youth movements, from the Youth Food Movement in the Netherlands and from Zayaan Khan, a young woman from South-Africa.

What makes the ABC community different?

I participated in the last two meetings of the ABC, a colleague from SEARICE participated in the earlier activities. I liked the venues, having the meetings in rural areas, without distractions, in simple but pleasant buildings instead of luxury hotels. The ABC is a very diverse group, whereas other networks in which SEARICE participates are more homogeneous. I would have loved to participate in all the working groups. A small point of criticism is that we did not get into deep ideas during the plenary sessions. But in all, I hope that the ABC community will continue the exchange of knowledge among its members.

“In development work, outsiders really should just be facilitators”

Open source seeds and agroecology

An interview with Dr Ramanjaneyulu - *Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, India*



Dr Ramanjaneyulu

Dr Ramanjaneyulu (Ramoo) is an agricultural scientist and the director of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) since it was established in 2004, having earlier worked with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). CSA is acknowledged for scaling up its work on non-pesticidal management (NPM). “We have seen that it takes ten years to replicate such models on a large scale.”

Photo: Bertram Zagema

“ABC can play an important role in strengthening open source seed systems”

What was CSA's role in the ABC?

CSA's contribution to the agricultural biodiversity community was the sharing of its experience in substantive upscaling, especially with non-pesticidal management. From its inception, it has recognised the need for alternative models, and for bridging the gap between formal and informal knowledge systems. This is crucial if replication is to happen on a large scale. We shared this with others in the ABC. We are now moving our attention to the next series of challenges: open source seed systems, organic agriculture, and markets. We aim to establish seed banks and seed enterprises. Today, four major crops together cover 50% of the total cropped area. Community interests should drive the cropping patterns. There is a need to maintain diversity and livelihoods, but there is very little authentic information on the cultivation and use values of available seeds.

What were the results of the ABC?

There is an important role for the ABC to play in the maintenance and strengthening of open source seed systems. Each of us has a different experience in different situations. How can we learn from each other? We cannot have only one way of doing things. But there is a need for unity, in terms of a common goal and common principles. Many of us work at the grassroots level, few at state and national level. In India we are in the process of forming local seed networks and setting up community registers. We are now discussing how a common framework can be developed. In June 2015, we had a meeting in Hyderabad with Hivos, Oxfam Novib, Jack Kloppenburg of the University of Wisconsin, and some groups from India. Over three days, we discussed problems, doubts, and the expected resistance of the government, and came up with several ideas on how to take this further. ICAR representatives were positive. We decided to form a scientific group, a data generators group (farmers) and an Indian ABC. This process would have happened anyway with or without the ABC, but the ABC accelerated the process of understanding the issues. Personally, I learned a lot from Jack Kloppenburg and would not have come across him if it had not been for the ABC. To me this proves that the learning space created by ABC has been useful.



Photo: Bertram Zagema

Ramoo showing Jack Kloppenburg of Open Source Seed Initiative (United States) the Chemical Free Village Enabavi in Telangana, India.

Influencing policy

An interview with Patrick Mulvany (UK Food Group), United Kingdom



Patrick Mulvany with colleague Eric Kisiangani

Patrick Mulvany was formerly a senior policy advisor for the international NGO Practical Action, formerly ITDG. He is specialised in policy advocacy and analysis on appropriate technology, agricultural biodiversity and food sovereignty, especially in relation to negotiations in FAO, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS). He has worked on agricultural biodiversity projects in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but has now retired. Since retiring from Practical Action, Patrick Mulvany continues to work as a consultant with social movements, especially on the theme of agricultural biodiversity. A current project supported in part by the A@K programme is working with the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty on a report for FAO's State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, and a short briefing about agricultural biodiversity intended for social movements.

Photo: personal collection Patrick Mulvany

Did the ABC community meet your expectations?

I was invited to join the ABC at the outset. I saw this as an opportunity to reach out to a different group of people and organisations than the ones I was then working with. I hoped it would result in contacts with a broader network bringing in different perspectives: a network that raises awareness, about the importance of agricultural biodiversity to many aspects of the food system, among people that have a lot of experience and outreach in related fields, but previously did not have a specific understanding of agricultural biodiversity. One important aspect that I encouraged in ABC discussions was to increase the awareness of people within the programme, and those with whom we interacted, about agricultural biodiversity not just as the diversity of seeds or potatoes or the like, but also the diversity of livestock, fish, pollinators, soil micro-organisms – all dimensions of agricultural biodiversity; it is beyond the diversity of seeds. The programme was able to achieve that.

I found that communication within the community was intense during meetings but subsequently it was difficult to sustain a proper flow of information and knowledge sharing. For example, email lists and the d-group did not function well, which was a bit of a disappointment.

Can you give an example of growth and knowledge sharing within the community?

Due to the different contexts in different parts of the world, information sharing within the ABC offered many interesting perspectives. The idea that the inclusion of the private sector was essential for the ABC, which emerged from the initial meeting in Kenya, was ultimately seen as counter-productive. In practice, the interests of the corporate private sector is against sustaining agricultural biodiversity and themes such as open source seeds. In the last meeting in the Netherlands, it was recognised that there needs to be a 'wall' between open source seed systems and the monocultural industrial seed system; the two cannot co-exist. It was a good learning experience to recognise that the biodiverse production systems espoused by the ABC need to be protected from industrial systems that undermine such diversity, and consequently, that the ABC should not be inclusive of people representing that biodiversity-reducing system.

What was achieved in terms of influencing policy?

The last meeting in the Netherlands was the best, with effective commitment by the participants to follow-up. For example, as a result of the working group on influencing policy, an edition of a newsletter on agricultural biodiversity was prepared for ECO – the newsletter of CSOs at the CBD – published in South Korea at CBD/COP11 on World Food Day (16 October) 2014. Various members of the ABC community also provided inputs to the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) in January 2015, and specifically for the civil society statement to the final plenary, which I coordinated.

I am interested in continuing to participate in the working group on open source seeds, which might be useful in contributing to the understanding about alternatives to seed laws. And the resilience working group could provide helpful new insights as well.

What did you learn from the ABC about agricultural biodiversity?

In the first meeting in Kenya in 2012, a paper by the Stockholm Resilience Centre on agricultural biodiversity and resilience was a particularly valuable contribution to my understanding of agricultural biodiversity and the importance of diversity within an ecosystem contributing to its resilience. I gained more insight on resilience and was able to relate this to earlier work with farmers and alpaqueros/as who grow hundreds of potato varieties in the Peruvian highlands, many in varietal mixtures. Their productivity might be relatively low, but the resilience is high, guaranteeing harvests. Removing components of this diversity can lead to a ‘tipping point’ of a collapse in the production ecosystem. Monitoring agricultural biodiversity and other factors related to resilience could help to anticipate catastrophic crop failure.

“The ABC made good contributions to the discourse, and can help to keep the issue of agricultural biodiversity alive”

The discussion on the terminology, of agrobiodiversity, agricultural diversity, or agricultural biodiversity was also interesting. As summarised in the document “Scope of agricultural biodiversity” prepared for the Madurai workshop by Dunja (PAR) and myself the ABC decided it preferred to use the term agricultural biodiversity instead of agrobiodiversity, partly because ‘culture’ is an integral dimension of this sub-set of biodiversity.

What is the added value of the ABC?

The ABC was initiated at an appropriate time, as there is a great need for debate on how to sustain agricultural biodiversity. The issue will continue to be important and the intensity of the debate will probably increase. People also need to know about the role of those who produce our food, small scale farmers, gardeners, livestock keepers, fisherfolk, forest dwellers, etc., in defending agricultural biodiversity on-farm and to know about the impact of policies at local, national and international levels in sustaining or destroying agricultural biodiversity. The ABC made good contributions to the discourse, and the community can help to keep the issue of agricultural biodiversity alive. I hope that the steering committee of the ABC will find new mechanisms to fund the community and ensure its survival. One task they could facilitate is the production of a regular newsletter that keeps ABC members updated about activities, key issues and events.

Scaling up and out - Making knowledge and experience flow

An interview with Willy Douma (Hivos) and Gine Zwart (Oxfam Novib), the Netherlands

Willy Douma and Gine Zwart were involved in the A@Knowledged programme from its beginning until the present. They initiated the programme, ensured the financial basis and together with Sarah Doornbos and Bertram Zagema (from 2014) coordinated the programme.



Willy Douma

Photo: Centre for Sustainable Agriculture

Willy Douma works for Hivos and is responsible for the agriculture, biodiversity and climate change theme within Hivos' Green Entrepreneurship programme. Her focus areas are: knowledge management in agricultural biodiversity; sustainable intensification; business and biodiversity.



Gine Zwart

Photo: Dhan Foundation

Gine Zwart works for Oxfam Novib. Currently, she is a Senior Programme Advisor. Until December 2014 she was a Senior Policy Advisor for sustainable rural livelihoods, developing vision, strategy and policy, and overseeing the agriculture, food security and rural development programmes of the organization.

What were your expectations for the A@K programme?

Gine: For Hivos and Oxfam Novib the A@K programme was innovative. Both organisations consider knowledge generation and knowledge sharing key. The A@K programme had the ambition to experiment with applying knowledge co-creation and knowledge sharing optimally for agricultural biodiversity, and to generate more insight and evidence to build and upscale programmes within Hivos and Oxfam Novib related to this issue. At the start, we had no fixed ideas of how the programme would develop. We just knew we wanted to construct a programme with knowledge holders, practitioners and academics, as well as knowledge brokers like Hivos and Oxfam Novib. Our role was to materialise these ideas and shape a programme that would benefit all these various actors. Our concrete expectations, were the elaboration of documented cases and insights as to how to bring agro-biodiversity knowledge, insights and practice to scale.

Willy: We started with the aim to catalyse change through knowledge. Hivos was running several knowledge programmes that all shared a common desire to change the current paradigm through knowledge development. From working with several organisations from around the world on diversity in agriculture, we felt that a knowledge programme might be instrumental in bringing diversity thinking to scale. We wanted to bring together the knowledge of practitioners and academics, to challenge current paradigms about landscapes and bring in resilience thinking. We also aimed to bring high potential initiatives of civil society organisations to scale.

What were some of the most important outcomes and challenges?

Willy: Our efforts mainly went into building a community. And, because of the nature and diversity of participants in the A@K programme, this took some time. We, as Hivos and Oxfam Novib, wanted to be more than just donors and participated as full members with our own individual backgrounds. Generally speaking, some “North-South” tension needed to disappear, as well as tensions between practitioners and academics. Agricultural diversity is a sensitive subject; all members realise that knowledge is power. Fortunately, it did not take too long before confidence was created mostly thanks to the facilitation of Frank Heckman and Maarten Bruns. During this process, mutual appreciation among ABC members started to grow, and we realised that forming part of a knowledge network not only benefits our knowledge but also means that we belong to a platform that supports us in our respective struggles and advocacy.

Gine: The ABC really has become a community where people trust each other to share their dilemmas and fears and where they can re-energise themselves to continue working in this field, particularly when it's work that often is against the mainstream paradigms of industrialised agriculture.

It turned out to be more difficult than expected to unpack concrete success cases with scaling up potential. It is very difficult to ‘catch stories’. How do you measure social capital and the impact of knowledge and knowledge sharing? We also observed that measuring impact may be feasible at a micro level (seeds), but it becomes more difficult at a meso level (farm), and gets extremely complex at a macro level (environment). For this, we had very high and unrealistic expectations at the beginning of the programme. The ABC managed to share evidence and insights and we had debates on these issues, but case documentation remains a challenge.

What are your lessons learned?

Gine: It was interesting to have a joint programme of Hivos and Oxfam Novib. It has not always been easy, but it was a positive experience for both organisations. Looking back, the programme showed that knowledge is very diverse, and that knowledge sharing only functions well if there is a balance between receiving and giving. It is a process of confidence building. As such, we benefited from the insights of the programme; especially for lobbying and advocacy work of Oxfam Novib.

Willy: We did not have a lot of time, only three years, and a limited budget. What we learned was that building the community and personal leadership of its members was most effective. Challenging mainstream thinking through collaboration with academics turned out to be more difficult. We made several attempts to work more with academics on landscape thinking, on resilience thinking and on why the World Bank supported IAASTD report (on the importance of agro-ecological thinking), written by 400 researchers from around the world, was ignored. Most of these efforts were short term and did not lead to broader collaboration. Our efforts did result in building the community in the first two years and in building confidence, and we identified common activities and problems. In the third year the community worked on solutions, specifically in the three working groups: open source seeds, resilience and policy influencing. We believe that the community is strong enough to survive. It does not matter whether it continues as a structured community or as a loose network. It is very promising that in November 2015 the ABC has already self-organised a fourth meeting, in Thika in Kenya, without coordination by Hivos and Oxfam Novib.

3. Reflection

The interviews in chapter 2 demonstrate that the A@K programme has been challenging and innovative, and that many participating members refer to it as a 'success'. They explain why the programme and its agricultural biodiversity community have been beneficial and which points can be improved. In this final chapter we formulate with the help of the interviewees some lessons learned: for individual participants, for organisations and communities, and for other projects and programmes.

Specifically, drawing from the interviews, we identify six key factors that should be taken into account in order to build an effective knowledge community around agricultural biodiversity.



Photo: Romado Fermin Javillonar/AgriCultures Network

Displaced farmers in The Philippines now living in urban areas add biodiversity to the environment by cultivating previously unused land.

Diversity and cross-culturality

“Because of the different contexts in different parts of the world, information sharing within the ABC community offered many interesting perspectives.” (Patrick Mulvany)

One element of success appears to be the rich diversity of the ABC, in terms of age, gender, geographies, and institutionally, as it includes members from grassroots organisations, NGOs, social enterprises, and academic institutions. Members who are used to participating in more homogenous networks, embrace this diversity as an added value and success factor of the programme as it provides many opportunities to learn from each other, within and between countries, regions and continents, and to grow together as a global community in expected and unexpected ways.

“Because the ABC has members from many parts of the world and from different sectors, we heard many new ideas and widened our scope. The ABC gave me inspiration to push within SEARICE to widen the scope of our work beyond rice and cereal seeds, and to include other income (and food) generating activities. (...) I wanted to learn things that are different from SEARICE. We work especially in the humid Mekong watershed, so it was interesting to learn from experiences in semi-arid and arid areas.” (Dang Cereno)

The diversity was not only experienced as enriching but also served very concrete purposes, such as providing a mirror or wider outreach possibilities:

“The programme brought together different organisations to engage with other stakeholders to identify blind spots in its work, and to share experiences and perspectives.” (Elizabeth Katushabe)

“I saw this as an opportunity to reach out to a different group of people and organisations than the ones I was then working with. I hoped it would result in contacts with a broader network bringing in different perspectives. (...) The programme was able to achieve that.” (Patrick Mulvany)

A specific characteristic of the diversity in the agrobiodiversity community is its cross-culturality, as the community consists of people coming from diverse institutional and social cultures. While not always easy, and sometimes hilarious, this sharing across cultures was appreciated in various ways, at times at a very personal level:



Photo: Supriya Biswas/AgriCultures Network

Farmers in India use innovative technology to improve their capacity to communicate.

“While as Northerners we struggle to work out if and how the private sector can engage with agroecology, Africans do not necessarily look at it like that. For many Africans, agroecology just is what it is - and that is very liberating.” (Michael Farelly)

“When I first heard the metaphor of breaking the glasshouse, I thought: here in Africa we do not have glasshouses, and if we would have them, we certainly would not want to break them.” (Michael Farelly)

“I am a young Northern female scientist and my voice, especially at the beginning without any personal trust behind it, held little legitimacy in this context. (...) Over time, however, as we got to know each other, these barriers broke down. But it was humbling! I am so grateful for an incredible learning experience, where I also started a process of finding a space for my own voice.” (Jamila Haider)

Building community

“It’s fascinating how learning, engagement and involvement have been connected.” (Michael Farelly)

“The members have become a community and fostered a spirit of working and learning together.” (Frank Heckman)

The ABC experience shows that building a community and building knowledge on agricultural biodiversity go hand in hand. Both processes are intertwined and, as the interviews highlight, cannot be predicted or strictly managed. In the ABC, a collaborative structure evolved based on the needs of the participants:

“The work with the ABC was a participatory process, not top-down, and with honest conversations. Trust was a key issue. People needed time before they were willing to share information and knowledge. In a good community, people are willing to give, and this is what we saw in the ABC.” (Frank Heckman)

This was partly thanks to the methodology employed by the facilitator of various workshops, as well as the venues. Indeed, several ABC members mentioned the importance of the working environment of the meetings. Although it is difficult to assess the concrete effects on community building and its results, several ABC members suggest that this has been a key factor of the success of the community.

“Frank Heckman’s exercises and methodology were refreshing.” (Michael Farelly)

“I liked the venues, having the meetings in rural areas, without distractions, in simple but pleasant buildings instead of luxury hotels where most meetings take place.” (Dang Cereno)

Although the ABC members appreciate the way the community has been built, several members expressed the wish to have more practical conversations and reach more depth in sharing experiences on the ground. In that sense, they appreciated the working groups that were formed around specific themes: resilience assessment, open source seed systems and policy, and which were perceived to have yielded very tangible results. For instance: the meeting on open source seed systems that took place in Hyderabad half a year later brought people and knowledge together that would have otherwise not met. The lively discussion about the resilience assessment tool proved very helpful in improving the tool. A lot of energy seems to have been generated when people were working together around concrete actions and, in this case, the working groups are a key organisational element that helps members focus their joint work.

“The ABC is an example of a community that becomes active when something really needs to happen. It is a community based on a real need, and with a real performance. Sometimes the fire burns strongly, and at other moments one needs to have patience and to try to keep the fire burning.” (Frank Heckman)

These are very common processes in knowledge communities. Once members return home from a workshop, they get quickly drawn into many other things that seem put more concrete and immediate demands on their time. Communities have to learn to ‘live’ with such processes.

Many of the members of the ABC community are involved in the struggle against GMO seeds, land grabbing and the misuse of property rights by large agroindustrial companies. In this sense some participants felt that a common ground has been constructed, that built identity and encourages joint future action.



Photo: Dhan Foundation

The ABC at work in Madurai, India

“A common ground has been built that serves as a shield for attacks of agro industrial companies on individuals and organisations that promote agricultural diversity.” (Frank Heckman)

“The idea that the inclusion of the private sector was essential for the ABC, which emerged from the initial meeting in Kenya, was ultimately seen as counter-productive.” (Patrick Mulvany)

To continue knowledge sharing there must be regular communication. There were moments in between the workshops that communication among the community members was almost absent.

“Of course, there were challenges in the ABC community. In the meeting in Thailand (2012) we did a lot of planning, but afterwards hardly anybody did anything. Also, the d-group is a beautiful web platform, but few people used it.” (Michael Farelly)

Many people commented that ‘real life’ communication during the workshops helped people to get to know each other and build trust - probably being the most important ‘glue’ of the community. Skype meetings were difficult because of internet problems and differences in time zones, but also crucial, in the preparation of the workshops. We heard there was a magic moment during the Netherlands workshop when people started storytelling around the campfire. Initially, the digital platform - the so called d-group - was hardly used by the community, but towards the end it became a more effective tool for the communication of the working groups. The process of the A@K programme showed that the frequency and characteristics of communication depend on many factors, and that the choice of communication methods should take into account unpredictability and be a part of adaptive management.

Knowledge sharing: know what and know how

“I knew generally about the importance of biodiversity but have been stimulated to think more about the principles behind it. The overview paper on resilience and agrobiodiversity by the Stockholm Resilience Centre has added a conceptual dimension to our understanding of agrobiodiversity.” (Vasimalai)

“I very much enjoyed participating in the ABC policy group, and learn from ABC members who regularly carry out lobby activities.” (Michael Farelly)

“We learned about markets and trade, focusing on how to produce and promote products of agricultural biodiversity sources.” (Maryleen Micheni)

“There is an important role for the ABC to play in the maintenance and strengthening of open source seed systems. Each of us has a different experience in different situations. How can we learn from each other? We cannot have only one way of doing things.” (Ramoo)

“I learned a lot from other activities in the community, such as the resilience assessment exercises, from storytelling and from the possibilities of mapping. Another inspirational subject was the influencing of policies.” (Michael Commons)

What transpires from these quotes is an eagerness to build substantive knowledge on agrobiodiversity themes, as well as strategic knowledge on how to facilitate social change and how to influence policy agendas.

Substantive knowledge is knowledge about the contents, *the know what*, for example: What are the key principles behind agricultural biodiversity? What is resilience? What are open source seed systems? Or more specifically, what is the importance of longhorn cattle in a semiarid ecosystem?

Strategic knowledge is knowledge about the processes and strategies towards building agrobiodiversity – the *know how*, for example: How to communicate with rural people about resilience? How to communicate agrobiodiversity with a broad audience? How to write an article? How to strengthen open seed systems? How to share knowledge across cultures, across institutions and scales? How to link practice to policy? How to be effective when sitting at the table with policy makers? How to promote products of agricultural biodiversity?



Photo: Dhan Foundation

The ABC at work in Boxtel, the Netherlands

Participants learned much regarding both substance and strategy, and it became clear to all that both types of knowledge are important but are shared in different ways. They also recognised that what they had to offer to the group was highly complementary, and talked about a wide range of learning experiences, some of which culminate in new innovations:

“One of the articles in Farming Matters was about an experience of the CENESTA in Iran about a model that has given a large number of farmers access to a great amount of biodiversity in a relatively short time: Evolutionary Plant Breeding (EPB). I was so inspired by this story. Now I am looking for possibilities to apply EPB for rice.” (Michael Commons)

“The ABC Community is now in the process of pulling together resources to enrich this resilience assessment tool with the expertise of the members of the group, for example, with ‘eco-mapping’ from MELCA in Ethiopia, and with community mapping from SEARICE. Farmers and practitioners said that this is definitely a tool that they can use in their communities.” (Jamila Haider)

Embracing unpredictability

“To my surprise, in our last workshop in Boxel, an unobtrusive participant from Pakistan told me that he had applied the methodology of community building in several communities in his home country.” (Frank Heckmann)

The lessons learned from interviewed members of the ABC show that the results of knowledge sharing for processes of upscaling cannot always be predicted, as they often occur unexpectedly at different levels, and have influence on methodology, on policy, on theory, on practice, etc.

Various interviewees also mentioned that they obtained new knowledge, but that many of the new insights were very different from the type of knowledge they expected to receive, when they started with the A@K programme. By nature a new insight cannot be predicted. Therefore a knowledge programme with many presumptions and a strict logframe probably will not be successful.

One of the factors of success of the A@K programme was its adaptability. When starting the programme, Hivos and Oxfam Novib – the initiators – knew that they faced several challenges. As managers and participants of the programme, they would wear two different and sometimes conflicting hats. Moreover, knowledge is power, and power is a sensitive issue. They also anticipated tension between the academics and practitioners, and between South and North, due to different perceptions, interests and identities. And finally, it is difficult to measure what knowledge sharing takes place, and how.



Frank Heckman (centre): ‘A comfortable setting of a meeting, including, housing, tranquility, surroundings and food, is crucial for the construction of trust, the willingness to give, the ability to think and feel, and the possibility for good communication.’

Photo: Dhan Foundation

This is why it was decided that the emerging community had to use an adaptive management approach, balancing the need for more rigid structures and the need for flexibility; between control and delegation; subtle differences between community building, joint, and concrete actions; and between prioritising expected results with those arising unexpectedly. And it seems this approach was appreciated:

“It appealed to me that the community was not driven by the institutional interests of its members but by a joint belief in the importance of knowledge building in relation to agrobiodiversity. A loose network emerged, and one of its strengths was that none of the members tried to control the network.” (Vasimalai)

The unpredictability and need for adaptation of the A@K programme and the community do not mean that the programme should always have a loose and non-structured shape. In its process, the meetings evolved and became structured according to participants’ needs. Many members appreciated the working groups and the concrete results of the three groups in the fields of open source seeds, resilience and influencing policy.

Linking with advocacy

“The ABC was initiated at an appropriate time, as there is a great need for debates on how to sustain agricultural biodiversity.” (Patrick Mulvany)

“The aim of the community is to create ripples in the mainstream of agricultural development. We engage with policy makers, and with the entire society around us.” (Vasimalai)

Advocacy was the main theme of one of the three working groups of the community, but also a main objective of all the community members. Connecting knowledge sharing with advocacy gave the ABC community a very concrete purpose. It also helped to build identity and vision and with that, strengthened the ABC community as a whole:

“We came to a shared understanding that what we wanted was self-assessment by communities (...) to communicate to external actors and to possibly avoid inappropriate development interventions. At the end, we had an understanding of what we valued in this community, and what made it healthy and strong.” (Jamila Haider)

One concrete result of the joint advocacy work of the community is a common vision that has been documented in the ECO newsletter on agricultural biodiversity published in South Korea at CBD/COP11 on World Food Day (16 October) 2014. Various members of the ABC community also provided inputs to the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) in January 2015, and specifically for the civil society statement to the final plenary. The community also contributed towards influencing policy in Rome (FAO) as well as governments in Africa and India.

In addition, the programme supported specific knowledge building activities that had an advocacy strategy attached to them, an approach that was highlighted as very successful by participants.

“With financial support from the A@K programme, the LIFE approach in India was studied and the outcomes were compiled in a report. This report was used to influence the Global Agenda, shared with members of the ABC group, and disseminated widely. I also presented the results of the study at the meeting on the Global Agenda of Sustainable Livestock Development in Cali, Colombia. (...) The programme helped create momentum for change towards agricultural biodiversity at a global level.” (Elizabeth Katushabe)

“Thanks to the A@K programme, TOAM and AFSA have been able to start producing a series of agroecology case studies, with organisations from across Africa participating. The cases will be presented at FAO’s regional agroecology seminar in November 2015 in Senegal.” (Michael Farelly)

Cross-fertilisation with other networks

“What is very important, is the synergy between the ABC, and continental, regional and national networks. For example, CTDO is also a member of the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA), as well as another regional network with organisations from Mozambique, Swaziland, Malawi and Zimbabwe. And based on the experience and knowledge sharing in the ABC community, CTDO jointly initiated a national Zimbabwean network on agricultural diversity, with the name ZABC!” (Andrew Mushita)

The A@K programme has strengthened the ABC members to become a professional global action-learning community for agricultural biodiversity. It is a network that interconnects with and influences other structured and unstructured

networks at local, national, continental and global levels. At this moment, we can conclude that the seed of the agrobiodiversity community has grown into a plant. We can only guess which form and size the plant will have in the future, how it will interconnect with its surroundings, and how it will contribute towards its ecosystem. Some effects however can already be seen, dubbed by Vasimalai as the ‘ripple effect’:

“ABC has also created ripples in the Dhan Foundation. The first ABC meeting took place when Dhan was preparing its 2012-2016 strategic plan. Inspired by the meeting, we decided to add a biodiversity objective to Dhan’s overall objectives.” (Vasimalai)

“During the meeting in Thailand, Green Net shared their incubation programme for youth. PELUM Kenya borrowed from those experiences and we are now implementing a market incubation programme with Kenyan youth for the next two years, up to 2016, fundamentally inspired on Green Net’s approach.” (Maryleen Micheni)

“Knowledge sharing is how we add value to joint actions in local, national, regional and global networks. It is the best way to scale-up and achieve major impacts. In that sense, the ABC is an important network.” (Andrew Mushita)

The strong institutional rootedness of the members of the community in different organisations and networks clearly is a key factor of success for further spreading and upscaling of knowledge on agricultural biodiversity.

...And finally: some reflections on the future

There were various points that participants wanted to make about the future of the community, based on their lessons learnt in the past three years.

One aspect is the institutional side of the ABC. One participant commented that one of the challenges is that many organisations don’t write down their own experiences, as documentation is not part of the organisational culture. The challenge then is how good practices can then be shared? In other words: *“How do we make what excites us visible to others?”* (Vasimalai)

It was also suggested that the coordination of the ABC community could possibly move to the South. Another person pointed at a specific challenge for the future survival of the community: the need to involve more youth and more Latin American members.

Referring to the continued relevance of the network’s purpose, it was said that the ABC made good contributions to the discourse, and the community can help to keep the issue of agricultural biodiversity alive. The big question, another person commented, is where the agroecology movement is going. Five years ago nobody talked about agroecology, now everyone is. *“Monsanto will probably try to claim the term agroecology in the near future and we should be aware of that.”* (Michael Farelly)

On a final note, the people involved in the ABC and its working groups on open source seeds and resilience, as well as others, expressed a wish to continue their knowledge sharing. This implies that the ABC members will need to continue looking for appropriate moments and ways to communicate, in order to ‘keep the fire burning’.

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