

DIVERSITY FAIRS IN VIETNAM: A METHOD FOR RAISING AWARENESS AND LOCATING DIVERSITY AND CUSTODIANS OF CROP GENETIC DIVERSITY

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Diversity fairs bring together farmers from one or more communities to show the range of landraces that they store and cultivate. Rather than giving prizes for the best individual variety, diversity fairs award farmers or groups of farmers for the greatest crop diversity and related knowledge. In Vietnam, diversity fairs have been used as an entry point for on-farm conservation, to sensitize the farming community, to locate and identify key custodians of high genetic diversity and their associated knowledge base, and to categorize crop diversity into groups of cultivars that are common, rare, endangered and have disappeared. Where communication is difficult among farmers and with outside communities, the fair can serve as a useful means of providing access to information on local germplasm. Diversity fairs were supported in six villages in three ecosites in northern Vietnam: mountain (Da bac), mid-land (Nho quan) and Red River Delta (Nghia hung) during 1998 -1999. Farmer's cultivars were identified in participatory manner by the judging committee, as well as by farmers. Results of diversity fairs showed that the two mountainous villages of the Dabac ecosite (Cang Village and Tat Village) displayed the highest rice diversity compared to the other ecosites. Genetic diversity displayed in the fairs was higher than previously reported from these villages. Dabac site contained the highest diversity for upland rice of the three ecosites. In the lowland site of the Red River Delta, although there is less diversity, despite pressure of technical intervention, farmers have still maintained rice landrace diversity because of market incentives of high quality aromatic rice. Lessons learnt from the diversity fair were that farmers were found to be mostly consistent in identification of crop cultivars of their locality, however, there were some cases of inconsistency. Group could easily identity mistakes of each other and came into general consensus. Diversity fair stimulated both farming and scientific communities as a participatory on-farm conservation strategy because objectives of farmers and researchers were both met by this activity. Scientists also appreciated using participatory approaches for variety identification. In addition, genetic resource persons and plant breeders found the diversity fair an important method to collect crop genetic resources in more representative manner. During the diversity fair, scientists also discussed with farmers about their traditional cultural practices and botanical knowledge that farmers used for maintaining and using local crop diversity. The diversity fairs in Vietnam have now become a school for scientists, development workers and farmers to share information and knowledge among each other.