

Cultural Diversity Through Genetic Diversity

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In *The Idea of Biodiversity*, David Takacs says that for him, the word biodiversity signals a cultural phenomenon. This interpretation would certainly not be the expected observation made by rice scientists. When they exchange rice seeds for evaluation, they look at their biological or genetic qualities—not their cultural significance.

In espousing a people orientation in our goal of achieving food security, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability, we find in the 30-year-old International Network for Genetic Evaluation of Rice (INGER) an ideal-type network. INGER is composed of rice scientists: about a thousand from the national agricultural research systems of 95 rice-growing countries and from four international agricultural research centers (IITA, WARDA, CIAT, and IRRI).

There are social and cultural values embedded in this network, although its name suggests very genetic- and germplasm-centered activities. Beyond the genetic lingo of B2161C-MR-57 and P901-22-11, people actually lie at its heart. The network fosters participation in a new culture of cooperation, consciousness of sharing, and exchange—not only of breeding lines, but of information, insights, and experiences toward a shared objective.

Cultural Dividends

From 1975 to 2004, more than 23,000 breeding lines and varieties

have been exchanged and evaluated globally. Germplasm has moved from one continent to another and among countries within a continent. Sometimes countries had no diplomatic relations; INGER's political neutrality helped them to overcome this.

INGER provides an opportunity for every country, large or small, rich or poor, to be a donor of valuable genetic materials that could help another country—even one that is “not a friend” or one that is richer. An unspoken norm exists that those who have more will give more.

Varieties directly released in different countries through INGER and those varieties with parents donated by other countries are the epitome of international public goods in both spirit and substance. They actually benefit real people.

Genetic diversity is helping to ensure that cultural diversity will endure. Grain quality, for example, must match consumer preferences, which are truly cultural preferences. This is very much in the United Nations' vision of human development, defined as the “process of enabling people to have wider choices.”

Rice seeds share a common food value and “speak” a common language that transcends politics, geography, and culture. In Africa, for instance, INGER helped to break the barrier in rice science between English-speaking and French-speaking countries.

Unique Culture of Reciprocity

In traditional societies and subsistence farm households, food security is not just a matter of food production but also of investing and maintaining social relations.

At the family, kinship, and community levels, the exchange and sharing of seeds and planting materials take place on a very reciprocal basis. Seeds are also given as gifts. In this reciprocal relationship, the basis of exchange is not money, but trust and mutuality of benefit.

INGER is a shining example of how seemingly “romantic” notions of interdependence, exchange, and sharing work in real life. In this network, no country is too poor to give and no one is too rich to receive. This is a philosophy that promotes a unique culture of reciprocity at the global level that is improved by the tools of science.

INGER is a beautiful illustration of humanity working together for our common future in a world filled with social conflicts, tribal wars, and fierce competition over the control of natural resources. We must continue to share even as countries declare national sovereignty over plant genetic resources. After all, rice is life. ■

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