Characterization of the custodian farmers

In total, 20 farmers participated in the workshop that came from 5 countries: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal and Thailand. Farmers from India came from eight different states. There was only one woman farmer, who came from the Indian State of Tamil Nadu. All farmers introduced themselves to the group explaining the diversity they hold, which unique material they have, their sources of motivation, and what kind of support they need to be able to continue their conservation, dissemination, or adaptation efforts. The group included a farmer who maintains 135 rare farmer varieties of mango within his orchard, a farmer who has gathered over 80 varieties of rice, and a farmer who experiments with and cultivates a wide range of tuber crops and vegetables at his home in Nepal. Many farmers in the group have domesticated wild tree species (*Garcinia* and *Mangifera*), including some farmers who have developed varieties that grow in sandy soils.

It was clear from the farmers’ presentations that motivations to maintain a wide range of crop species and landraces differ among farmers according to factors such as the type of crops maintained, socio-cultural background, and geographical and climatic context. The only woman farmer participating in the workshop expressed motivation by an appreciation of the high nutritional quality of native millet varieties and their high adaptability to diverse local land conditions in the Kolli hills. On the other hand, several mango growers were motivated by the pride and honor of having a century old orchard containing many rare varieties. Some farmers were inspired by the desire to have a diverse portfolio of crops and varieties. The motivations of the 20 farmers are thus diverse, responding to the personal, socio-cultural, economic and environmental needs of the farmers. A larger sample of custodian farmers, including more women farmers, would enable analysis of the relative importance of different motivations as they relate to the farming system and socio-cultural and environmental context.

Defining custodian farmers

The workshop assisted in redefining the working definition of Custodian Farmer by the workshop organizers. The working definition at the start of the workshop was as follows:

Custodian farmers are those conserver farmers who actively maintain, adapt and disseminate agricultural biodiversity over time and space, including the culture and institutions in which it is embedded, and the knowledge needed for its use and cultivation.

The definition1 was refined during the workshop as follows:

Custodian farmers are those farmers (men and women) who actively maintain, adapt and disseminate agricultural biodiversity and related knowledge, over time and space, at farm and community levels and are recognized by community members for it. Often, custodian farmers are actively supported in their efforts by family or household members.

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1 Although the term custodian farmer is becoming more recognized in the Anglophone world, it is not yet known how the concept “translates” to other languages and accepted term. This will require more research and reflection.
Based on the refined definition and the 20 custodian farmers present at the workshop, an initial typology of four types of custodian farmers was identified (see the figure below). Within farming communities one can find a) farmers who maintain a rich and unique portfolio of species and varieties, b) farmers who maintain and promote a portfolio of species and varieties, c) farmers who maintain and adapt a portfolio of species and varieties, and d) farmers who actively maintain, adapt and promote their set of species and varieties.

**Typology of Custodian Farmers (Sthapit, 2013)**

Discussions and case studies suggest that boundaries between the types of custodian farmer might be blurred depending on the local context, including the crop type, local culture, exposure to new knowledge and locations, and environmental conditions. What is important to note is that custodian farmers are very often central actors in institutions for community based management of diversity, such as community seed banks or community forests, in which they play nodal roles driven by their own set of motivations. Custodian farmer’s roles can also change over time due to exposure to new knowledge and information or interventions by external agencies. The purpose of the typology therefore is to highlight the diversity of custodian farmers one might expect to find in the field.

**Exploring policy support**

The workshop was instrumental in developing a “responsibilities and rights” framework for the identification of policy support to custodian farmers. This framework is based on the principle that farmers are de facto the primary actors in in situ conservation on-farm, for which they deserve full recognition and appreciation from the global community.

The deliberations also resulted in some clarity about the sustainability of conservation efforts by the custodian farmers. Although in some farmer families the custodianship will be passed on to the next generation, there are numerous occasions where this is not guaranteed. A proposed mechanism to maintain custodianship is through the establishment of a network of custodian farmers in which the ‘tenure’ of one custodian farmer can be taken over or
shared by one or more farmers in the network when they are no longer capable of continuing their efforts. Custodian farmers at the workshop liked the idea of establishing this type of network, which could be organized based on geography, type of crop/species (perennial, annual, animals etc.) and other key issues.
Table 1. Function of custodian farmers: roles, responsibilities and rights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities (Assumed/realised)</th>
<th>Rights (conferred)</th>
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| Maintain | • Save seed/planting materials of richness of species/varieties/traits diversity conserved at HH level and document associated TK  
• Take care of at least 1 unique/rare/special/difficult to propagate variety | • Formal and informal recognition  
• Protection of TK (individual or collective)  
• Ensure through current or new/adjusted legal framework of Farmer’s Rights |
| Adapt/innovate | • Identify, domesticate, select or improve traits of interest  
• Blend and use ecological indigenous knowledge of diversity, heritability and selection with scientific knowledge | • To save and/or sell seeds/materials  
• Access to information and materials  
• Participation in research and development activities  
• Recognition (internal or external) for innovation  
• Protection of farmers knowledge in secured way that leads to community benefits  
• Farmer plant breeders rights |
| Promote | • Share materials and knowledge with other farmers  
• High frequency of exchange of seed and associated knowledge | • Right to participate in decision making & benefit sharing through community-based approaches: i) capacity building, ii) seed selection and CBSP, iii) collective benefits-CBR, CSB, PPB, FFS, iv) community development, v) CBM fund |
| Continuity | • Make sure family continue to harbor portfolio of species and varieties  
• Transfer of knowledge and practice to younger generation  
• Sets of traits maintained when old varieties are replaced  
• Ensure alternative options for crops/varieties under threat | • Benefit sharing  
• Empowerment of network of custodian farmers  
• Institutional support (local level –CSB and national gene bank)  
• Recognition of shared custodianship within households and whole communities  
• Access to new materials.  
• Direct household-level benefits |

**Recommendations**

The workshop confirmed that custodian farmers exist and play a distinct and important role in agriculture. They maintain and conserve a wide range of crop species and varieties based on their own interest. They are often a nodal point for the informal exchange of seed and plant material among farmers. They are key providers of seed and plant material and related knowledge to breeders and seed improvement or adaptation programs. Custodian farmers
provide key functions that link the traditional and modern seed systems and their efforts contribute to the evolutionary process of crop adaptation in a changing context.

Considering their key roles in on-farm conservation of agricultural biodiversity, the workshop recommendations are as follows:

1. Advocate for the formal recognition of (the concept of) custodian farmers, similar to the recognition of concept such as farmer leader or progressive farmers. (Action: Local and national government agencies)

2. Create and raise awareness on the roles, responsibilities and rights of custodian farmers at different levels, including staff and managers of genebanks, agricultural department and extension services, seed companies, development NGOs, agricultural research institutes and farmer or community organizations. (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs).

3. Support the identification and documentation of at least 1000 case studies of custodian farmers in the next 2 years for various neglected and under-utilized crops, fruit trees, spices and vegetables. (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs)

4. Assess the importance of custodian farmers for on-farm/in situ conservation of local crop diversity (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs)

5. Accept farmers’ elite/unique materials for registration in the name of the custodian farmer or the community, according to appropriate standards (Action: National PGR System/Protection of Plant Variety and Farmer’s Rights Authority)

6. Establish one or more networks of custodian farmers to empower them to share knowledge, skills, seed or planting material, and potentially engage in research and development interventions. In order to gain experience and institutional innovation, pilot 10-20 networks of custodian farmers to consolidate their role as conserver, innovator and promoter of agricultural biodiversity, and strengthen a framework that can lead to policy formulation (Action: National PGR System/Protection of Plant variety and Farmer’s Rights Authority)

7. Further develop the framework of responsibilities and rights of custodian farmers, including the right to participate in national decision making processes and benefit sharing policies as well as international agreement such the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and Convention on Biological Diversity (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs).

8. Use a community-based approach to build capacities of custodian farmers on: i) protection of traditional knowledge of PGRFA, through documentation, use and conservation of traditional knowledge (e.g. Community Fruit Catalogue, Community Biodiversity Register, Community Seed Banks etc.), ii) the right to save, use, exchange and self-farm saved seed/ planting material, (e.g. Community Seed Banks, Community based Seed Production (CBSB) and participatory crop improvement (Grassroots breeding, Participatory Variety Selection, Participatory Plant Breeding, Farmer Field Schools etc.), iii) the right to participate in making decisions at the national level on the matter of conservation and use of PGRFA and overall community development, (e.g. Community Biodiversity Management, Institutional strengthening and governance, establishing CBM fund etc.), iv) the right to equitably participate in sharing benefits arising from the utilization of PGRFA by creating
economic and nutritional benefits (e.g. Product development, Marketing and Home processing) Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs). Formulate a national on-farm/in situ conservation strategy with participation of custodian farmers and other key stakeholders through which their voice is heard and their specific needs are addressed. Custodian farmers’ networks could be an integral part of the national conservation strategy and linked directly to agricultural biodiversity conservation institutions, such as genebanks to document diversity and involve custodian farmers in research on seed regeneration, improvement or adaptation programs (Action: National PGR System/Protection of Plant variety and Farmer’s Rights Authority) Connect custodian farmers to agricultural extension services (e.g. KVK in India and similar agencies in other countries), NGO sectors and the formal and commercial seed system. (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs)

9. Mobilize social capital to create locally driven financial assets to establish Community Biodiversity Management Funds that can directly support custodian farmers’ and their communities at the local level. (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs)

10. Support custodian farmers and their communities with product development, market linkages and home processing activities to utilize the special nutritional and commercial traits of a wide range of neglected landraces and crops. (Action: State and National Agricultural Research and Development agencies; Conservation NGOs)

(Citation: Sthapit, BR, H lamers and R Rao, eds 2013. Custodian farmers of agricultural biodiversity: selected profiles from South and South East Asia, Bioversity International)