

GRAIN in Africa: building bridges and providing support

Africa's NGOs and farmers' organisations are increasingly looking at the local and sustainable management of biodiversity as a central element in the daily struggle for survival of rural communities in this region. Traditionally, the discussion on biodiversity in Africa was largely focused on parks and wildlife. This is changing, and now the importance of biodiversity-based agriculture and the central role of local communities in its management is increasingly recognised. However at the same time the region is being pushed to become the dumping ground of the genetic engineering industry with the argument that GM crops will help to feed this hungry continent.



It is in this conflicting environment that GRAIN's presence in Africa aims to help civil society organisations deal with the issues and promote local management and control over biodiversity. In this extremely large, diverse and complex region, we are doing that in a variety of ways.

Since 2000, GRAIN has been working with Jeanne Zoundjihékpon (right) from Benin to strengthen action and networking across Francophone Africa. As a researcher and policy maker, Jeanne has a longstanding involvement in the biodiversity discussion in the region. Initially as the regional coordinator of GRAIN's 'Growing Diversity' project in West Africa, and later as a staff member, Jeanne's main task is to help strengthen civil society action in the region. She produces a monthly newsletter *'Semences de la biodiversité'*, organises meetings, supports NGOs and farmers' groups, and organises direct action to influence regional policy.

Recently GRAIN linked up with the regional NGO INADES-Formation to launch a coalition for the protection of the African genetic heritage in Francophone Africa, an advocacy and networking group that could be the embryo of sustained action across the region. In February this year, GRAIN rang the alarm bell when we received information that biotechnology companies were pressuring Mali and other countries in the region to open the floodgate for transgenic cotton (www.grain.org/briefings/?id=184). Later this year, we plan to launch educational kits on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and on community rights for use by NGOs and farmers' organisations across the region.

In Anglophone Africa, GRAIN has oriented its work mostly towards supporting and strengthening the African Biodiversity Network (ABN). This young network focuses on a number of thematic issue areas, such as fighting the imposition of GMOs, promoting seed security in the hands of small farmers, reevaluating the cultural aspects of biodiversity and promoting legislation on community rights and biosafety. Henk Hobbelink, GRAIN's coordinator, helps to coordinate the network. With support of the ABN, coalitions fighting GMOs have been formed in Kenya and South Africa, and seed security networks in Zambia, Malawi and South Africa. Annual strategy meetings are held to build cohesion and strength across the network.

Lovemore Simwanda (right) of the Zambian National Farmers Union is on GRAIN's Board of Directors. His farmers' union was centrally involved in the debate in Zambia in 2002 that led to the country rejecting GMO food aid. He is concerned that farmers should have access to locally adapted seed, which forms the basis of seed security. Another GRAIN Board member very active in Africa is Bob Brac. Bob is director of the Montpellier-based NGO Bédé, and has been busy promoting biodiversity discussion in North and West Africa.



Everybody with experience of working in Africa will agree that communication, networking and continued active collaboration is extremely difficult to sustain in the region. But at GRAIN we believe that we can only make a lasting contribution through the patient building of such collaboration and strengthening information exchange. After all, over millennia farmers in Africa have developed a highly diverse and productive agriculture precisely through the creation of seed exchange networks and collaborative local knowledge systems. The successful future of Africa's agriculture lies in building on these seeds and further strengthening those knowledge systems.

