

Custodian farmers are those who actively maintain, adapt, and disseminate agricultural biodiversity on farm and community levels, and are known within the community for doing so.

Custodian farmers are experts in on-farm and in-situ conservation, and are extremely useful as research partners in strengthening agricultural seed systems.

General Characteristics

1. Driven by conservation ideology and use of genetic resources
2. Knowledge holder on agricultural biodiversity
3. Recognized source of plant material and seeds.
4. Motivated, committed, self-directed

Identification

Identification of custodian farmers requires careful evaluation, as they are commonly confused with “progressive farmers” or village leaders. The following protocol has been developed to assist in locating true custodian farmers:

- 1
 - Host an orientation with community members to discuss characteristics of custodian farmers.
 - Emphasize farmers with: rich crop diversity, conservation mindset, deep knowledge of subject, tendency to share knowledge with others.
- 2
 - Hold focus group discussions or key informant interviews to create a shortlist of potential custodian farmers (5-8 candidates).
- 3
 - Travel to farms of candidates and validate potential by determining which conservation efforts they employ.
 - Observe and check whether the candidate farmers: maintain, adapt, promote, and safeguard
- 4
 - Discuss with the identified candidates their use of crop diversity.
 - Use Four Cell Analysis to understand the rationale behind their crop portfolio.
- 5
 - Discuss with the farmer their motivations for conservation and diversity.
- 6
 - Determine what sets that custodian farmer apart from other farmers in the area.
 - Assess the likelihood of his/hers practices being continued in the future.

Typology of Custodian Farmers



Note: Maintain, Adapt, and Promote are actions done with the farmer's diverse crop portfolio

Important Notes

Custodian Couples & Families

- It is common for the spouse or family to play a critical role in the conservation practice.

Commercial & Custodian

- Often farmers are both commercial and custodian, as the economic benefits of commercial farming help to sustain conservation practices and the diversity of plants of custodian farming can lead to commercial innovations.

Development

- Strengthening farmers with existing agro-biodiversity motivations and interests can be an effective strategy to advance on-farm conservation and improve local seed systems.

Potential Roles of Custodian Farmers

Conservator & Safety Net

- Maintain a large collection of crop varieties on-farm
- Care for rare and unique varieties
- Often active members of community seed banks
- Use seed sharing to diversify risk to ensure varieties are not lost due to bad growing year

Breeder & Innovator

- Understand the specifics of local crop breeding
- Carry out selective breeding to promote specific, desirable traits from certain varieties
- Act as key figure in strengthening local seed networks

Seed Supplier

- Often act as source of seed for informal seed systems within the community

Extension Agent

- Provide information about local crop diversity to fellow farmers, which is especially important in areas with low access to outside information

Local Promoter

- Raise community awareness of the importance of agricultural biodiversity

Social Facilitator

- Partner well with external agencies or projects to disseminate information, mobilize social capital, and promote behavioral change

Bioversity International is a research-for-development organization that provides scientific evidence of the role that on-farm and wild agricultural and forest biodiversity can play in a more nutritious, resilient, productive and adaptable food and agricultural system. www.bioversityinternational.org