

Seeds for Survival: A Global History of Seed Banking

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Seed banks and global food security

Since the 1960s, national governments, international organisations, NGOs, and private philanthropies have invested heavily in the creation of 'seed banks.' These collections serve as permanent repositories for the world's vast genetic diversity in food crops and, increasingly, its diversity in wild plants as well.

Seed banks are seen today as essential to human survival. For example the Millennium Seed Bank Partnership, a UK-centred global seed conservation network, describes its mission "to combat potentially catastrophic threats to human wellbeing by safeguarding wild plant diversity and enabling its sustainable use".



Varieties of corn (maize) Image: Keith Weller, USDA



Svalbard Global Seed Vault
Image: Global Crop Diversity Trust

Telling the history of a global conservation effort

This project seeks to understand: how the genetic diversity of plant species came to be seen as a critical but imperiled resource essential to human survival; how seed banks came to be seen as the obvious solution to the threat of losing such diversity; and the consequences of these ideas—and the institutions and activities they inspire—for global food security and human well being in the present.

A critical and understudied topic

This will be **the first-ever broad, archival-based study of the origin and development of seed banking** as an activity intended to conserve endangered crop diversity.

The project will contribute to dialogue about the value of seed banks among scientists and policymakers, as well as to scholarly debates related to the history of agricultural science and biological conservation, the consequences of agricultural modernisation, and the achievement of global food security.



Maize (corn) seed samples at CIMMYT germplasm bank
Image: Xochiquetzal Fonseca/CIMMYT



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