

How should public seed banks guard genetic wealth?

There was a news report not so long ago that ICRISAT (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics), an international organisation and part of the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) consortium, had entered into an agreement with Gubba Cold Storage Ltd. to set up a private seed bank, the first of its kind in India. ICRISAT holds thousands of varieties of chickpea, pigeon pea, groundnut, sorghum, pearl millet and small millets collected from farmers' fields across the world.

What makes the ICRISAT varieties particularly valuable to plant breeders and seed companies is the fact that almost the entire collection has been characterised so that the properties of each variety are known. This information along with the huge choice of genetic material (over 120,000 varieties) is a veritable gold mine for seed companies. Access to crop varieties characterised for important properties like disease and pest resistance, drought and salinity tolerance, adaptability to soil types and weather conditions, yield traits etc., can be rapidly converted into lucrative crop varieties for the market.

The disconcerting thing about the ICRISAT deal with Gubba Cold Storage is that public material held in trust by ICRISAT has been at least physically transferred to a private company. It is not clear under what terms the material will be stored in Gubba cold storages. Who will be able to access the material? How will unauthorised use be prevented? What will be the monitoring process? How will violations be dealt with?

The CGIAR has tried to walk a (sometimes fudgy) line between multinational corporations and their demands for patents on materials they develop from public gene banks and the pressure from civil society that this would be unethical and tantamount to piracy. ICRISAT must make public the terms and conditions under which it has placed public genetic material into the hands of a private company.

Read full, original article: [Who owns our genetic wealth?](#)