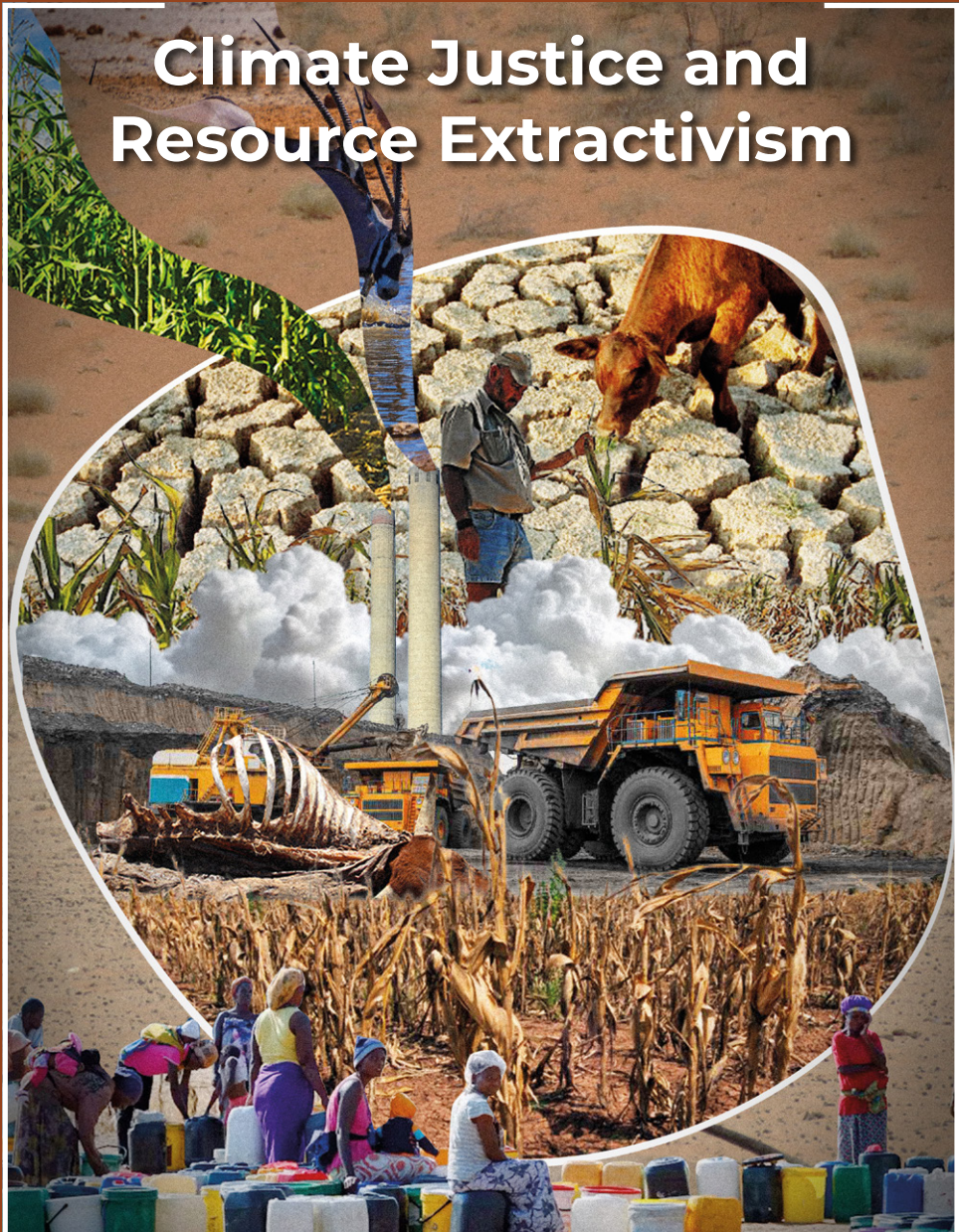


# Climate Justice and Resource Extractivism



# Preserving Heritage: The Importance of Seed Banking in Namibia

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## Introduction

In Namibia, the practice of seed banking has become increasingly significant in recent years, particularly among rural women in the northern regions. Seed banking, the practice of preserving the seeds of various plant species, plays a vital role in safeguarding genetic diversity, ensuring food security, and countering the adverse effects of climate change.

This case study explores the key issues surrounding seed banking in Namibia, specifically the role it plays in promoting sustainable agriculture, preserving indigenous seeds, and protecting local agricultural knowledge. Amidst the rise of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and climate change's devastating impact on food production, the growing concerns among rural women about the long-term impacts



*Photos contributed by Maano Nangolo*

of GMO seeds have led to a collective effort to preserve Namibia's traditional agricultural practices. This article will highlight the challenges faced by these women, the actions they have taken to safeguard indigenous seeds, and the outcomes of their efforts.

## Background

The practice of seed banking is not new in Namibia. Historically, the people of Namibia, particularly in rural areas, have relied on traditional agricultural knowledge to sustain their livelihoods. Communities have passed down seeds from one generation to the next, ensuring the preservation of valuable indigenous crops. Among the most commonly used seeds in Namibia's northern villages are varieties of millet, known as omahangu in Oshiwambo, and other indigenous plant varieties like "ombuto yandjipiti and ombuto yitoka yokalye" (Civic+264, n.d.).

These seeds are passed from mothers to daughters as part of a rich cultural heritage in communities in regions including Ohangwena, Oshana, and Omusati. It is the adult and elderly women, typically aged 40 and above, who are the custodians of this knowledge. Their role in preserving these seeds is crucial, not only for the food security of their families but also for the cultural continuity of their communities. In addition to their familial roles, many of these women are

subsistence farmers, relying on their crops to feed their families and sustain their livelihoods (Civic+264, n.d.).

## Challenges

The introduction of genetically modified seeds has raised serious concerns among these women. Although GMOs promise faster-growing crops, they are seen as a threat to the genetic diversity of indigenous plants, potentially eroding the region's agricultural heritage. For these women, the need to preserve indigenous seeds is not just a matter of food security but also of cultural preservation. The cultural and emotional connection they have to their seeds is strong, as they see these plants as part of their identity and heritage (Shiva, 2016).

Despite their best efforts, the women of Namibia's rural regions face several challenges in preserving their indigenous seeds. One of the most pressing issues is climate change. Over the years, Namibia has been subjected to prolonged droughts, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and shifting weather conditions, all of which have made seed storage and crop cultivation increasingly difficult. Droughts lead to poor harvests, and in some cases, crops do not even reach maturity. As a result, the indigenous seeds that these women rely on for food security have become increasingly scarce (GRAIN, 2015).



The challenges of seed banking are further compounded by pests such as maize bugs, and the constant threat of birds consuming the stored seeds. Traditional methods of seed storage, such as using ashes to ward off birds and storing seeds in eshisha or okaanda containers, have been used for generations. While these methods have proven effective to some extent, they cannot fully protect the seeds against the devastating effects of natural disasters or the encroachment of GMOs (Civic+264, n.d.).

The spread of genetically modified seeds is a direct challenge to the preservation of indigenous seed varieties. GMO seeds are often promoted by agricultural corporations and governments as a solution to food insecurity, offering higher yields, faster growth, and increased drought resilience. For many rural women in Namibia, however, the adoption of GMOs represents a departure from traditional agricultural practices and a loss of cultural identity. There is a growing sense of urgency to protect and preserve indigenous seeds before they are replaced by GMO varieties (Shiva, 2016).

## **Actions**

In response to these challenges, rural women in Namibia have come together to take action. Driven by a strong sense of community and a desire to protect

their agricultural heritage, these women have established informal seed banks to preserve and store indigenous seeds. These seed banks are not just places to keep seeds but are symbols of resistance to the forces of globalisation and genetic modification.

The women involved in these seed banks have also been vocal in their opposition to the widespread use of GMOs. They have sought the support of local organisations, government bodies, and international agencies to raise awareness about the dangers of genetically modified seeds. Some have taken part in workshops and training sessions to learn more about sustainable agriculture, organic farming, and seed-saving techniques. Through these efforts, they aim to protect their communities from the negative impacts of GMOs and ensure that their food systems remain intact (GRAIN, 2015).

The government of Namibia has also recognised the importance of preserving indigenous seeds. Efforts have been made to promote seed banks and support rural communities in their quest to protect their genetic heritage. Additionally, environmental and agricultural NGOs have been working alongside these women to provide training and resources that will help them maintain sustainable agricultural practices in the face of

climate change and other challenges. For instance, the Agricultural Bank of Namibia, in collaboration with the KfW Development Bank, has launched programs to support farmers and micro, small, and medium enterprises in the agriculture sector, aiming to enhance financial inclusion and support sustainable agricultural practices (German Embassy Windhoek, 2023).

## Results

The efforts of these rural women to preserve indigenous seeds have led to some positive outcomes. Through their seed banking initiatives, they have successfully preserved a wide range of indigenous plant species that are now threatened with extinction due to climate change and the spread of GMOs. These seed banks have not only ensured food security for their families but have also helped to strengthen community ties, as the women collaborate and share knowledge about seed-saving and sustainable farming practices.

The opposition to GMOs has sparked important discussions about the need for a balanced approach to agriculture in Namibia. While genetically modified seeds may offer a short-term response to food insecurity, many rural women believe that preserving indigenous crops offers a more sustainable and culturally appropriate solution. The preservation of indigenous seeds also

aligns with the country's broader goals of sustainable development and the protection of cultural heritage (Civic+264, n.d.).

While the challenges remain, the seed banking initiatives have demonstrated the resilience of Namibia's rural women. They have shown that, even in the face of climate change, natural disasters, and the proliferation of GMOs, traditional agricultural practices and community-based seed preservation initiatives can still thrive. Their work not only protects seeds but also safeguards cultural identity (GRAIN, 2015).

## Conclusion

Seed banking plays an essential role in preserving genetic diversity, ensuring food security, and combatting the effects of climate change in Namibia. Through the efforts of rural women in the northern regions, traditional seed-saving practices are being kept alive, ensuring that future generations will have access to the rich agricultural heritage of their ancestors. Despite the challenges posed by GMOs, climate change, and natural disasters, these women have shown resilience and determination in their fight to preserve the seeds that have nourished their communities for generations. The seed banking movement in Namibia is a testament to the power of grassroots activism, cultural preservation, and sustainable agriculture.

## References

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