

Emergency Vegetable Seed: Observations from 20 Years of Programming

Seed Programs International
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In 2016-2017 I helped provide input to a research work highlighted here at seedsystem.org, [Emergency Vegetable Seed Interventions: Can We Expect Improved Nutrition or Income Generation Among Beneficiaries?](#) The practice of giving vegetable seed during emergency response rests on the hypothesis that home garden harvests will improve nutrition and income. Via a deep literature search and a multitude of interviews, lead author Lauren Pincus concludes that we as a community of practitioners have failed to provide much proof of our most basic theory of action. The connection between vegetable seed, vegetable gardens, and better nutrition can be made with logic on paper, but evidence on the ground is thin. Our daily work is fueled by a steady diet of hopes, assumptions, and anecdotes!

I lead Seed Programs International (SPI), a US-based NGO that, since 1999, works through partnership to support small-scale vegetable seed projects in emergency response, development, and education. In some ways, SPI's work exemplifies the recommendations of the research, and in other ways we have been part of the problems cited.



Madagascar, 2015

SPI's Approach

Our approach both in and out of emergency situations is two-pronged. First, we support access to diverse, quality, appropriate vegetable seed. This may be by providing our own seed supply, which is sourced from the global seed trade and selected for broad adaptation to stress conditions worldwide, or by sourcing seed locally. We ship SPI seed in small-garden sized packets printed in five languages (or custom-printed in others) along with graphical planting instructions for those who can't read. We maintain germination testing and help our partners overcome import barriers.

Today there is much caution around the import of materials so as to prevent undermining local commerce, creating dependency, and/or forcing shift away from cultural and historic preferences. This caution is a good thing. For our projects, a balance of shipping seed vs. buying locally is determined by consulting project leaders and local growers about their needs and experience with vegetable seed. Our end goal is for people to grow a wide variety of well-selected, dependable vegetable crops which will better their nutrition and bring greater economic power to women and men. This outcome can arise from native plant foods, locally-sourced seed, locally-saved seed, and globally-sourced seed material—we don't think that working in any one of these categories has to be subtractive from success in the others.

Second, we support development of local leadership and capacity to carry home garden project goals forward. Sending seeds thousands of miles as aid is not a good long-term solution, so SPI must start partnerships with an end in mind. We work with our partners to help seed growers and recipients achieve self-sufficiency. Sometimes this is through seed saving. More often our partners' work is to use the power of a quality external input (seed) to catalyze a heightened interest in growing, eating, and selling vegetables. Once that is in place, there is personal and financial motivation for program partners or seed recipients to connect with vegetable seed sellers in their own region.

Best Practices: Where We Succeed and Fall Short

The article by Pincus et. al., linked above, details many observations and recommendations for future practice. Here are a few phrases selected from that work, each paired with a reflection on how SPI's programs have operated in relation to this guidance.

“Home garden programs have been shown to increase dietary diversity, but these improvements have not generally led to significant improvements in important nutrition outcomes. . . . Measuring changes in diet requires a strategic evaluation plan.”

SPI and our partners, to our knowledge, have not tried to directly measure nutrition outcomes at a level of scientific rigor that would provide proof of concept. So, we are in no position to dispute this finding, and agree that well-funded evaluative research would benefit all of us as practitioners.

“Home garden interventions are often more successful at increasing dietary diversity if they use a multi-pronged approach . . . Seed distribution is only the first step in achieving benefits from vegetable production.”

SPI’s partnerships vary greatly and every project includes corollary goals which extend beyond the direct, expected benefits of a home garden. A holistic approach is evident even in an emergency:

- Partners in Madagascar, even during cyclone recovery, deploy seeds via women’s literacy groups. Learning to read and learning to grow vegetables occurs in tandem, with the garden providing subject matter for reading and writing practice.
- Partners in Honduras, during El Niño-driven drought, didn’t just give out seed; they also provide training in nutrition, cooking, entrepreneurship, and seed production.
- SPI partners in Liberia, while countering Ebola-driven food and income deficits, established community-level systems for sharing tools (“tool banks”) to support effective use of seed.

“Despite being easy to distribute, organizations faced multiple challenges in supplying the ‘right’ vegetable seed.”

SPI’s local partners choose the seed provided via our support, from our own catalog and/or from local vegetable seed suppliers. Very often, they make excellent choices for their communities. Nonetheless, we’ve now and then experienced issues similar to those cited by Pincus et. al.:

- Vegetable varieties with appearance or flavor too different from familiar to be accepted;
- Varieties that simply failed to produce under specific types of stress conditions;
- Seed provided or purchased out of step with appropriate seasonal planting dates with no clear way for local program leaders to preserve its viability in the heat and humidity.

SPI supports and encourages a high level of multi-species planting in home gardens in order to increase the chance that some harvests will produce nutritious food people will be excited to cook, store, and sell. But this is admittedly a sort of dartboard approach.

“Nutrition goals are often more explicit in vegetable seed interventions than income goals, however, farmers often aim for both gains . . . Measuring the income generated from garden sales is an important part of assessing overall project impact.”

While some practitioners consider sales (rather than consumption) of home garden produce to be a programmatic failure, it has never occurred to us at SPI to view it this way. A successful home garden planting of any one crop will invariably yield excess harvest (beyond household needs). Resourceful families will find small, local outlet markets to turn these harvests into cash. Some of our partners support these efforts through programs like business training and market outlet scouting, even during emergency response. In this way, families may afford to keep kids in school, rebuild homes, or buy other types of healthy foods like proteins—all beneficial outcomes in crisis recovery.

I often wish it were easier for our partners to measure garden nutrition outcomes. Yet these programs’ under-resourced capacity to measure specific program outcomes also become a sort of strength—in that they have flexibility in letting beneficiaries determine what they need most from the garden, such as income.

There’s a lot more to say about what makes emergency vegetable seed and garden programs succeed or fail. I hope that in the upcoming seedsystem.org blog series, you’ll chime in with your own stories, facts, and doubts, and that together we can move forward with an honest and challenging set of questions that may drive us to do better.

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