

GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

MCGILL UNIVERSITY



FINAL ORAL EXAMINATION
FOR THE DEGREE OF
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ABSTRACT

In resource poor farming systems, particularly those subject to environmental stress, agrobiodiversity is an important aspect of local livelihoods, food security, and seed security. Seed security refers to a farmer's ability to access and utilize available seed that is of good physiological quality and appropriate for local ecological and social contexts. The objectives of this thesis focus on understanding how access to different types of crops and varieties, through informal and formal seed systems, can contribute to reversing chronic household seed insecurity and support food production in semi-arid Kenya. In doing so, the research also aims to highlight local crops, varieties, knowledge, management strategies, and social organizations related to seed systems in Tharaka-Nithi County. A quantitative study used a household survey and the polytomous Rasch model to measure household chronic seed insecurity in three semi-arid counties in Kenya. Households were sorted into four categories ranging from seed secure to severely seed insecure. Variables of seed access, variety diversity, and household characters were compared among households in the four categories. There was no statistically significant difference between seed secure households and the other three categories of increasing seed insecurity for crop richness, variety richness, varieties per crop, and the Shannon-Wiener Index. Size of household, age of respondent, and years of farming experience were statistically significant. Severely seed insecure households averaged one more household member than seed secure households. A mixed methods study presents a detailed appraisal of local and regional seed exchange and seed saving that have contributed to seed security since time immemorial in Tharaka-Nithi County. Results from oral histories, semi-structured interviews, and a household survey suggest that introduced varieties of seed have actually added to variety diversity rather than degraded it through complete displacement of local indigenous varieties. Historical migrations to and from, and within, Tharaka have been key for introducing new seeds, establishing patterns of variety clustering, and mediating climatic stress. Over-time, local markets have replaced the need for long distance seed trade and are used by farmers to obtain lost or new varieties during times of acute stress, and are often relied on seasonally for legume seeds.

failure and heterogeneous rainfall patterns by mixing early and late maturing varieties of pearl millet, a practice followed since time immemorial. However, over time introduced varieties that mature earlier and introduced varieties that provide more yields have replaced the old indigenous varieties. Seed selection practices focus on long panicles and big seed as well as roguing out off-types called mathara.

A qualitative study identifies contemporary challenges of formal seed sector participation and access to seed of modern varieties in Tharaka. Results are discussed in relation to national seed policy, formal seed sector development, and seed system integration in Kenya. Thirty-nine percent of surveyed households reported that they had not grown seed of a modern variety originating from the formal seed sector in the last four seasons. The majority of modern varieties were accessed through reoccurring distribution of free seed, while maize seed was the only crop commonly accessed through agroshop purchase. Most farmers recycle seed that they receive from the formal seed sector.

This research presented a novel measurement of chronic seed insecurity and documents important social aspects of seed systems which contribute to the conservation of agrobiodiversity. The results will be useful to local and regional evaluations of seed security and national seed policies seeking to represent and integrate the challenges and realities of resource poor farmers. The results may also aid special efforts focused on in-situ conservation of the unique cultural and ecological diversity preserved by farmers in Tharaka.

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- 2011-2015 **PhD Candidate.** Plant Science.
McGill University. Montreal, Quebec.
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School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria.
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