

Sustainable use of plant genetic resources as a basis for youth agri-entrepreneurship: Survey-based insights from the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

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Abstract

Sustainable use of genetic resources is crucial for food sovereignty and adaptation of agriculture to climate change, but also for diversification of farm activities through the introduction of local products with origin labels. This research provides a preliminary state of the sustainable use of genetic resources as a basis for youth agri-entrepreneurship in the territory of the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) within selected producers with the focus on plant genetic resources. The methodology is based on empirical research and descriptive analysis based on a questionnaire. The research indicated that the sustainable use of plant genetic resources in the Republic of Srpska was not fully reflected in the production systems of family farms, but it did show a significant development potential. This research can contribute to better knowledge of the applicability of sustainable use of genetic resources in the Republic of Srpska.

Key words: Agrobiodiversity, Youth, Organic production, Agroecological practices, Rural development

Introduction

Genetic resources are genetic material of actual or potential value, that is, plant, animal, microbial or material of other origin that contains functional units of heredity (CBD, 1992). In the field of food and agriculture, they are a central component of agrobiodiversity, which includes diversity of organisms and genetic variations directly or indirectly relevant to food production and agriculture (Cromwell, 1999). Genetic resources for food and agriculture include

plant, animal, forest, aquatic, microbial, and invertebrate genetic resources, with plant genetic resources (PGR) being of particular importance as they represent a biological basis of agricultural production and world food security (FAO, 2012, 2019).

Sustainable use of PGR is not limited to their physical conservation. At the farm level, this involves continuous breeding, reproduction, selection, and exchange of local populations and varieties, thus enabling their further adaptation to environmental conditions and producers' needs. Therefore, on-farm conservation and use are complementary to *ex situ* conservation in gene banks, and not a replacement for it (Raggi et al., 2021; Raggi et al., 2024; Đurić et al., 2012; Đurić and Golub, 2018). Effective on farm - *in situ* conservation also requires appropriate documentation systems, uniform descriptors, and linking data on local populations, their habitats, management practices, and users with data on *ex situ* collections (Phillips et al., 2026).

Long-term sustainable use of PGR also depends on the agronomic, cultural, social, and economic value of local varieties. Developing markets for local products and origin labelling are particularly important because such valorisation connects the conservation of local varieties with their continued cultivation, farmers' knowledge, access to seed and planting material, and their active management within local production systems. Research and policy assessments in BiH indicate that local PGR can be maintained in the long term only when conservation measures are combined with seed availability, their practical use on farms, institutional support and opportunities for product differentiation and market development (Đurić and Golub, 2018; Kondić and Đurić, 2024). This relationship is also closely linked to food sovereignty, which recognises farmers' rights to save, use, exchange, and further develop seed as essential for maintaining agrobiodiversity, strengthening local food systems, and retaining community influence over food production (Đurić et al., 2025).

An analysis of 95 European examples showed that producers are the main drivers of the maintenance of local varieties, most often in organic or low-input systems, while seed availability, producer organisation, promotional activities, and market potential are important for their wider acceptance (Raggi et al., 2021). Consumers' willingness to pay more for traditional purple carrots in Spain confirms that information on local origin and specific characteristics can contribute to the economic viability of reintroducing local varieties into production (Gracia et al., 2020). However, commercialisation alone does not guarantee the conservation of diversity, and must be accompanied by the availability of reproductive material, knowledge, collective action, and clear mechanisms for the protection of a wider range of genetic resources (Kruijssen et al., 2009).

Sustainable use also requires linking producers, breeders, processors, traders, and consumers. Research in seven European countries has shown that consumer involvement can guide the development of agrobiodiversity-based food chains and increase the market acceptability of products (Chiffolleau et al., 2024). Short food supply chains, including direct sales on farms and local markets, can reduce the number of intermediaries, strengthen the link with consumers, and allow producers to take a greater share of the added value (EIP-AGRI Focus Group, 2015). European examples show that their effects are more favourable when there is cooperation, joint investment, knowledge, and institutional support, while the benefits depend on the way costs and benefits are organised and distributed (Mengoni et al., 2025). These models can be linked to organic certification, participatory guarantee systems, geographical indications, and other forms of specific quality marking, which link the product to local varieties, traditional knowledge, and territory (Santacoloma, 2007; Vandecastelaere et al., 2010).

The involvement of young people in agriculture and agribusiness can contribute to generational renewal, innovation, and the development of rural areas, but depends on access to land, finance, knowledge, markets, advisory and institutional support (FAO, CTA, and IFAD, 2014). Research on young producers in Italy and Poland has shown that initial EU support is associated with a higher likelihood of introducing innovations and engaging in collaborative networks (Carbone et al., 2024). Research in Serbia and Poland, as well as an international example from Indonesia, further shows that younger producers may have greater potential to adopt new tools and business approaches, but that education, adaptation of solutions to local conditions, trust, and investment opportunities are crucial for their implementation (Paraušić et al., 2025; Kramarz and Runowski, 2025; Citra Irawan et al., 2023).

Linking sustainable use of PGR, short and local value chains, and active youth participation creates the basis for agri-entrepreneurship built on diversification, local identity, and value-added products. Such an approach can simultaneously contribute to the economic sustainability of farms and the preservation of local varieties, provided that there is market valorisation.

This research starts from the assumption that young agricultural producers recognise the importance of old, local and traditional varieties and breeds, but that the degree of their practical use in production is limited. It is expected that the use of PGR is more pronounced among producers who apply agroecological practices, diversify production, and use direct or short sales channels. It is also assumed that limited access to seeds and planting material, expertise, institutional support, and market recognition represent major barriers to their wider use. At the same time, short food supply chains, local product identity, processing, and

adding value are expected to represent the most significant opportunities for linking genetic resources with youth agri-entrepreneurship development.

Material and Methods

The research was conducted using a survey questionnaire created in Google Forms (Google, USA, 2014). The questionnaire was prepared by combining two previously used surveys (Mićić et al., 2022; Foundation Alica, 2025). The methodology was grounded in empirical research and descriptive analysis of available data. The questionnaire consisted of thirty-one questions, divided into six parts: the basic data about respondents, data on agricultural holdings, data on the use of genetic resources, data on attitudes towards the cultivation of old, local varieties or breeds, data on the application of agroecological practices, and data on sources of information on this topic.

The data were collected in the period from December 2025 to January 2026. The questionnaire was sent via e-mail addresses collected through the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Srpska and from the website Organic from Srpska. Also, the questionnaire was distributed on social networks and in the expert group of the Network of Young Agricultural Entrepreneurs (<https://www.agripreneur.online/>).

The questionnaire was filled out by 30 random respondents. The focus group consisted primarily of young agri-entrepreneurs, then agricultural producers, experts in the field of agronomy, and future agricultural producers.

Collected data from Google Forms was analysed in Spreadsheets (WPS Office, version: 12.2.0.22530, 2025). In order to examine the connection between the level of education, owning a certificate, and the application of sustainable agricultural practices, an inferential statistical analysis was carried out in the IBM SPSS software (IBM Corp., version:22.0, 2013). The Crosstab's procedures, χ^2 test of independence, the Fisher's exact test, and the Spearman's correlation were applied. Due to the low representation of certain education categories, one category with a single respondent was excluded from the inferential analysis, so the final sample for statistical tests was $N = 29$.

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used for language editing and reference formatting. All content, interpretations, and conclusions were developed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Results and Discussion

Based on the survey, data were summarised into three categories: respondents' data, agricultural holdings' data, and data on respondents' attitudes.

General data

The questionnaire was filled out by people from different parts of the Republic of Srpska: namely, Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Bileća, Prnjavor, Derventa, Srbac, Trebinje, Gradiška, Laktaši, Bratunac, Pale, Prijedor, Stanari, and Gacko.

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire, the age of participants ranged from 23 to 55 years. The largest number of respondents were born in the period from 1991 to 2003, and a slightly smaller number were born in the period from 1970 to 1990. The survey was completed by 13 women and 17 men.

The respondents' level of education ranged from primary school to PhD level. The largest percentage (56.7%) of respondents completed higher education - agricultural engineer (17 respondents). One respondent completed elementary school, one had a PhD, eight finished secondary school, and three had master's degrees.

Data on agricultural holdings

In total 80% farm were registered in the official register, but only 40% of respondents were involved in the agriculture as the primary source of income. More than half of the respondents (56.6%) earned up to BAM 10,000, while 36.7% of them earned between BAM 10,000 and 100,000, and only 6.7% earned more than BAM 100,000. Over 70% of respondents included farm owners.

The greatest engagement in agriculture was taking place in the last 10 years (19 respondents), which may suggest that the interest of young people in agriculture has been slowly increasing. Six respondents were dealing with agriculture for 11-20 years and only five of them for more than 20 years.

The total land of all responded farms covered 232.04 ha, 80% of which were farms between 0.1 to 10 ha, and 20% of them were larger, between 10 to 35 ha. The majority of farms had two full-time employees, and during the season some farms increased the number up to 10 workers. Mixed plant and livestock production was the most represented.

Integrated production was represented on 30% of farms, while 53.3% were farms that produced according to the principles of organic production, regardless of whether they have a certificate. Only 6.7% respondents followed permaculture standards, while 10% did not follow any standards.

When asked whether they have certificates for production (organic, integrated), the answer was negative in 53% of cases, 37% had some kind of a certificate, and 10% of them were on the way to obtain certificates.

Data on producer's attitudes

Only 36.7% respondents had old, autochthonous, or local plant varieties, or animal breeds at the farm, mostly grown for their own needs.

Based on the survey, more than half of the respondents believed that the time of old, or autochthonous, or local varieties of plants or animal breeds was yet to come, and they would be increasingly valued by customers. Respondents also believed that main disadvantages for the cultivation of old, autochthonous, or local varieties of plants or animal breeds were finance and reproduction material: seeds, seedlings, or initial heads of the breed, and only then the workforce. When asked whether old, autochthonous, or local varieties of plants or breeds of animals were sufficiently represented on the market, 43.3% answered that they were insufficiently represented. Some of the reasons given for this were the general state of agriculture, people felt more secure when they grew new varieties because their marketing was easier, lower yields of old varieties compared to new varieties, unwillingness of consumers to pay more, etc. The respondents suggested that in order to increase the cultivation of old, or autochthonous, or local varieties of plants or animal breeds, it was necessary to provide more data on the quality and agronomic traits, to educate people through the promotion of old varieties and breeds, and to provide subsidies for producers.

Crop and field rotation, and organic mulch were the most represented agroecological practices, while the least represented were subsowing, direct sowing, no tillage, and establishment of flower belts (Figure 1). More than half of the respondents agreed that they would continue to apply agroecological practices in the next five years on their farm.

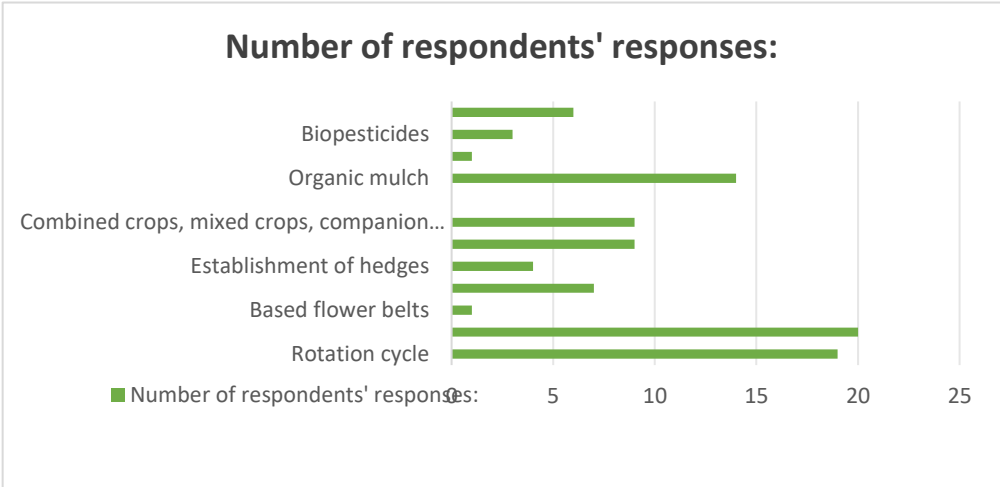


Fig. 1 - Agroecological practices used at surveyed households

The respondents most often used the Internet as a source of finding information about environmentally acceptable practices (40,.%). Local networks

and social media had the greatest influence as sources of advice or information when adopting any of the ecological agricultural practices (29.7%), public advisory services, and specialist agricultural newspapers were moderately influential (26.4%), while private advisory services had the least influence (3.3%).

The results of the statistical analysis have indicated that, in this case, the level of formal education has not been significantly associated with any of the observed variables (see Table 1). In this sample, no statistically significant relationship was found between the level of education and having a certificate, nor between the former and the application of sustainable agricultural practices. Likewise, in this case, no significant association was observed between the level of education and the type of applied practices.

Tab. 1 - The relationship between the level of education and the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices

Variable examined in relation to the level of education	χ^2 (df)	p	ρ	p (ρ)
Having a certificate	2.385 (2)	0.303	0.202	0.293
Application of sustainable practices	0.540 (1)	0.462	0.136	0.480
Type of practices applied	0.967 (2)	0.617	-0.182	0.343

Note. χ^2 = chi-square test; df = degrees of freedom; p = significance level; ρ = the Spearman's correlation coefficient; p (ρ) = significance of the Spearman's correlation. Values of p > 0.05 indicate non-significant results.

The Spearman correlation analysis has further supported these findings, indicating weak and statistically non-significant relationships between the level of education and all examined variables. Overall, in this sample, the level of formal education did not appear to be a significant factor associated with the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices.

Research results indicate that the sustainable use of genetic resources (GR) in the Republic of Srpska has not still been fully integrated into the production systems of family farms, but has shown a significant potential, especially among younger producers who use agroecological measures. Altieri (2018) note that preservation and sustainable use of genetic resources are directly related to the agroecological transition of modern sustainable production systems.

Although 80% of respondents had a registered farm, agriculture was not a primary source of income in 60% of cases. These data confirm findings about the multifunctionality of rural households, where agriculture is often combined with other sources of income and diversification strategies in order to increase economic resilience (Van der Ploeg, 2008).

Only 10% of respondents did not follow any sustainable production standards (integrated, organic, or permaculture). These results are an indication of the gradual acceptance of agroecological principles, which contribute to the preservation of biodiversity and the resilience of agroecosystems (Gliessman, 2014), while agroecological systems based on diversity and local resources show greater resilience to climate and market disturbances (Altieri and Toledo, 2011). However, the fact that more than half of the respondents did not have certificates indicates institutional barriers and insufficient support for producers. FAO (2019) emphasises that institutional support is a key factor for the conservation and commercialisation of traditional varieties and local resources. The level of education was not statistically significantly related to having a certificate, nor to the application of any sustainable practices ($p > 0.05$ in all analyses), which indicates that formal education has not been a significant factor in the adoption of sustainable production practices. The statistical findings obtained in this paper should be interpreted with caution, bearing in mind a relatively small and unrepresentative sample ($N = 29$), which primarily included young agri-entrepreneurs and small family farms. Therefore, the results can be considered indicative of the specific local context, but not a final proof of the absence of the influence of education.

In the context of using PGR, only 36.7% of respondents grew old, autochthonous or local varieties and breeds, mostly for their own needs. This result confirms the findings of Brush (2004), who states that traditional varieties are most often maintained through small producers and family farms, but without adequate market valorisation. Although more than half of the respondents believed that “the time of old varieties is yet to come”, obstacles such as financial constraints and weaker market placement limit their wider application. One of the ways to increase this production is the development of short food supply chains. Such chains enable producers to have greater control over the market, increase added value, and strengthen the local identity of the product and are particularly important for small and family farms that rely on product differentiation through quality and traditionality (Renting et al., 2003).

The research results also confirm that the respondents have recognised the importance of education, promotion, and subsidies for the development of production based on old and autochthonous varieties (78.51%). The inclusion of young people in such models of agribusiness is of particular importance. According to IFAD (2019), the youth in rural areas have the potential to combine innovation, digital tools, and traditional knowledge, thereby contributing to the sustainability of local economies.

Considering the application of agroecological practices, crop and field rotation and intercropping were the most prevalent measures, while more complex agroecological techniques were less present. Gliessman (2014)

emphasises that the transition to complete agroecological transformation requires gradual institutional and educational support, which can be considered relevant in the context of this research.

Although the sample of 30 respondents represents a limitation of the research and does not allow generalisation of the results, the data obtained have provided a valuable insight into the attitudes and practices of active and potential young agri-entrepreneurs in the Republic of Srpska (BiH). The results suggest that the sustainable use of PGR can provide a solid foundation for the development of innovative and more resilient agribusiness models, especially when linked to agroecological principles, short supply chains, and institutional support.

Conclusion

The questionnaire conducted on the use of PGR as a base for agri-entrepreneurs has indicated there has been an increasing number of young people in sustainable agriculture in the last ten years. However, there has been no concrete model of sustainable use of PGR as a basis for agri-entrepreneurship. The following can be considered to be the main reasons for this: the general state of agriculture, low financial resources, low availability of reproductive material of plants and animals, and a lack of workforce.

In order to increase the cultivation of old, indigenous, or local varieties of plants or animal breeds, it is necessary to provide more data on the quality and agronomic traits of old varieties or breeds, to educate people through the promotion of old varieties and breeds, and to provide subsidies for producers in that area.

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Одржива употреба биљних генетичких ресурса као основа за агропредузетништво младих: Увиди засновани на анкети из Републике Српске (Босна и Херцеговина)

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Сажетак

Одржива употреба генетичких ресурса је кључна за прехранбени суверенитет и прилагођавање пољопривреде климатским промјенама, али и за диверзификацију пољопривредних активности кроз увођење локалних производа са ознакама поријекла. Ово истраживање пружа прелиминарно стање одрживе употребе генетичких ресурса на територији Републике Српске (Босна и Херцеговина) код одабраних произвођача са фокусом на биљне генетичке ресурсе. Методологија се заснива на емпиријском истраживању и дескриптивној анализи заснованој на упитницима. Истраживање указује да одржива употреба генетичких ресурса у Републици Српској није у потпуности одражена у производним системима породичних фарми, али показује значајан развојни потенцијал. Ово истраживање је допринијело бољем познавању примјенљивости одрживе употребе генетичких ресурса у Републици Српској.

Кључне ријечи: агробiodиверзитет, млади, органска производња, агроекологија, рурални развој

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