

Nourishing the Future: Gene Banking Against Catastrophe in the Global South

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“Nourishing the Future: Gene Banking Against Catastrophe in the Global South” follows the history of West Germany's efforts in the 1970s and 80s to build seed banks in Ethiopia and Costa Rica. Initiated by the West German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, the seed banks were envisioned as repositories for the “raw materials for the insurance of future nourishment.” In Ethiopia, a devastating famine beginning in 1973 drove the project's development as did a resolution that same year at the UN's International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources, which awarded Ethiopia high priority for research and preservation initiatives on account of its important local crop varieties. In light of these developments, the BRD signed an agreement with the Ethiopian government to construct a gene bank in Addis Ababa designed to gather, store, and research Ethiopia's most unique and valuable crop varieties. The GTZ simultaneously justified developing an analogous project on similar grounds in Costa Rica. The Federal Republic supported both initiatives through millions of DM in funding together with administrative, research, and financial advising. Conceived as a line of defense against future famine and agricultural collapse, the seed banks served as a kind of archive of sustainability. But they also embraced a quietly insidious genetic imperialism that relied on peculiar scientific temporality. This project explores the history of their origins and analyzes the motivations that led West Germans to support this decades-long transnational effort, including the pursuit of a sustainable solution to global agricultural crises but also a reaction to the aesthetics of starvation deeply influenced by Holocaust discourse of the late twentieth century as well as an attempt to position the Federal Republic as a postfascist global power. The project also examines how indigenous scientists and locals later attempted to dismantle the gene banks' imperial effects by reconceptualizing the temporality on which they rested.