

1 February 2001

Ms Margareta Winberg
Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
103 33 Stockholm
Sweden



Dear Ms Winberg,

INTERNATIONAL UNDERTAKING
on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (IU)

We are writing as a high-level group of European non-governmental organisations concerned with:

- global food security,
- sustainable agriculture,
- the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in developing countries
- and future access to genetic resources.

We wish to urge you and your fellow agriculture and environment ministers in the EU to do all you can to achieve successful negotiations on the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

We have noted and strongly welcome Sweden's position of commitment to achieving a legally binding IU, and we would like further to encourage you to ensure, during your Presidency of the EU, that the Union takes a united, proactive and politically committed approach to resolving problems in the negotiations, and particularly to bringing the United States and other countries allied with it back on board with the IU and the negotiating process.

Such an approach from the EU is especially urgent before and during the next meeting of the international Contact Group, starting on 5th February 2001.

As you are aware, the August 2000 Contact Group made significant progress in agreeing text on the most important articles of the IU; but at the next meeting in November, this progress was undermined by objections to these agreed texts from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The process came close to collapse and was only rescued provisionally when the FAO Council instructed Ambassador Gerbasi, the Chair of the Contact Group, to try for another meeting.

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Ambassador Gerbasi had told the FAO Council that the only way to conclude the negotiations relatively rapidly would be through **political commitment to conclude by a fixed date**, not subject to more changes. He emphasised that because of this, those countries that participate in the negotiation process need to send delegations at a sufficiently high political level that allows them to take decisions at the negotiating table itself.

Urgent steps therefore need to be taken to increase the political commitment of all OECD countries and indeed all Members of FAO to ensure that negotiations can be speedily concluded. The developing countries are expecting the EU to act as the key broker who can bring the objecting countries back to the table. This was highlighted by Tewolde Egziabher, the Ethiopian leader of the Africa Group, who was quoted recently in UK newspapers as saying that he hoped the EU will increase pressure on its OECD allies to secure this agreement.

Importance of the IU

You will be aware of the sensitive yet urgent nature of the negotiations on this important international agreement. The IU aims to conserve and sustainably use the genetic resources of the world's most important food crops and to ensure that benefits through their commercial use are returned to developing countries.

Furthermore, the IU has the potential to be a prime example of responsible global governance, ensuring that those genetic resources that underpin social needs are maintained in the public domain. These resources are our 'life insurance' against future adversity be it from climate change, war, industrial developments or ecosystem collapse.

Failure in these negotiations could be extremely serious. In the view of many, ourselves included, failure could threaten food security not only among the smallholder farmers whose livelihoods depend on these resources but also consumers worldwide. Failure would also deny the farmers of the world the benefits they are owed for the contribution they have made through developing these genetic resources.

We believe, together with many who manage the world's public gene banks, that failure could lead rapidly to a severe reduction in the genetic diversity of food crops accessible to farmers and plant breeders from international, national and local collections. Failure would accelerate the decline of agricultural biodiversity on-farm, where, according to some estimates, more than 90% of crop varieties have been lost in the past century.

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The negotiations

The current potential sticking point in the negotiations is the extent to which the IU can include a mechanism for the sharing of benefits from the commercial use of protected varieties of plants. While the EU has a clear position on this a few countries are raising problems. They claim that this might be TRIPs incompatible. This logjam will also collect other disagreements around it, such as on access, the list of genera to be included, and so on; and so must be broken as a matter of priority.

It has been particularly unhelpful, we believe, that negotiations have stalled at each Contact Group session because the negotiators have lacked a political mandate to be proactive at the negotiating table, and have had to return to their domestic ministries for instruction. This is liable to cause some delays within the EU approach due to the difficulties of negotiating as a single entity with 15 members. To return to the words of Ambassador Gerbasi, above, the EU and its members need to show a higher level of political commitment, and give their negotiators the mandate to implement that commitment.

We would therefore be grateful to know the actions you are able to take as advocates of the IU and as holders of the EU Presidency in order to:

- increase the awareness and political commitment of fellow EU ministers of agriculture and the environment;
- lead the EU in a powerful, united and proactive approach to bringing the United States and other objecting countries back onto the path of progress towards a legally binding IU;
- create conditions in which the EU negotiators can operate successfully within the negotiating sessions

Future global food security and the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers are depending on the outcome of the next Contact Group meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Cowan Coventry,
Chief Executive, ITDG

on behalf of ITDG and the following European NGOs:

ActionAid, UK
ARCHE NOAH, Austria
Berne Declaration, Switzerland
Ecoropa, Europe

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ETC International BV, Netherlands
Gaia Foundation, UK
Genetic Engineering Network, UK
GRAIN, Spain
Greenpeace EU Unit
HDRA, UK
ITDG, UK
NGO Forum Environment and Development, Germany
SOLAGRAL, France

- CC.** Mr Auken, Svend The Ministry of Environment and Energy, Denmark.
Ms Ritt Bjerregaard The Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, Denmark
Mr Wilhelm Molterer, Federal Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, Austria
Mr Satu Hassi, Ministry of the Environment, Finland
Mr. Kalevi Hemilä, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland
Mr Jürgen Trittin, Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Germany
Ms Ulla Schmidt, Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture, Germany
Mr Joe Walsh TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Ireland
Mr Noel Dempsey, T.D., Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Ireland
Mr Jaak Gabriels, Minister for SMEs and Agriculture, Belgium
Ms Magda AELVOET, Minister for Consumer interests, Health and Environment, Belgium
Mr L.J. Brinkhorst, The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries, Netherlands
Monsieur Jean GLAVANY, Ministre de l'Agriculture et de la Pêche, France
Madam Dominique VOYNET, Ministre de l'Aménagement du territoire et de l'Environnement, France
Dr. Luis Manuel Capoulas Santos, Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries, Portugal
Eng. José Sócrates Carvalho Pinto de Sousa, Minister for the Environment and Land-Use Planning, Portugal
Mr Georgios Anomeritis, Ministry of Agriculture, Greece
Mr Costas Laliotis, Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, Greece
Mr Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, Politiche agricole e forestali, Italy
Mr Willer Bordon, Ministro dell'Ambiente, Italy
Mr D. Miguel Arias Cañete, Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, Spain
Mr D. Jaume Matas i Palou, Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, Spain
Monsieur Fernand Boden, Ministère de l'Agriculture, de la Viticulture et du Développement Rural, Luxembourg
Monsieur Charles Goerens, Ministère de l'Environnement, Luxembourg
Mr Kjell Larsson, Ministry of the Environment, Sweden
Mr Nick Brown, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, United Kingdom
Mr Michael Meacher, Minister of State, DETR, United Kingdom