

Food Providers Hold the Key – CBD has the mechanism

Comment on the CBD Agricultural Biodiversity Programme of Work by Patrick Mulvany, PracticalAction

After 12 years of debate, it is high time to put biodiversity-based agriculture at the heart of the CBD; adaptation through local management of agricultural biodiversity by food providers is essential for food sovereignty and planetary health in a warming world

The challenge for the CBD is that without radical transformation of the dominant model of industrial agriculture, livestock production and fisheries, not only will food providers and agricultural biodiversity continue to disappear but hunger will increase as will global warming. To forestall this, among other things, the CBD needs to decisively involve the social organisations of food providers in its work.

The food insecurity created by vulnerable, uniform and genetically weak monocultures and cloned livestock and fish of the industrial model will stalk future generations. What is needed in an unpredictable world is more not less diversity, collective not monopoly control of resources, localised not global food systems – systems that conserve rather than consume carbon.

The CBD will fail in its mission if it does not confront the tsunami of corporate control of the food system from seed to sewer. In place of this it must assert the primacy of agricultural biodiversity controlled by local people over economics controlled by unaccountable TNCs.

The CBD needs to stem the tide of corporate control of food and nature when revising its Programme of Work on Agricultural Biodiversity – opening the space in international and national policy as well as for local actions that will sustain agricultural biodiversity for livelihoods, living landscapes and the production of healthy local food.

The key to these local actions is held by small-scale family and peasant farmers, pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, forest dwellers and other food providers who know how to develop and manage a broad diversity of species, varieties and breeds – our agricultural biodiversity that underpins food sovereignty and resilient production systems in the face of multiple threats.

Agricultural biodiversity is more than colourful seeds, vegetables and fruits displayed in biodiversity boutiques. It is the product of the ingenuity of women and men whose knowledge and skills over millennia have crafted myriad varieties and breeds adapted to a multitude of ecosystems and suited to every social, cultural and economic need. It is the diversity of all species above and below the ground and in aquatic systems that have co-evolved with people to provide food, fodder, natural fibre and thriving ecosystem functions that sustain life on Earth.

However, there is a haemorrhage of these vital resources accelerated by the spread of the dominant model of industrial agriculture for commodities and agrofuels, intensive livestock production and extractive fisheries, contaminating those resources that remain with proprietary GMOs. These losses are exacerbated by inequitable trade and commercial agreements, seed laws and intellectual property rights systems that undermine farmers', livestock keepers' and indigenous peoples' rights.

A countervailing policy framework exists that will defend agricultural biodiversity: food sovereignty. This is the policy proposal of small-scale farmers who know how to provide good, wholesome food. It puts them and other food providers centre-stage in the food system and prioritises the needs of consumers for nutritious foods, sourced as locally as possible.

The core principles of food sovereignty cover all dimensions of a food system that will provide food in the long-term rather than short-term profits. It focuses on food for people rather than internationally tradeable commodities. It values food providers rather than eliminating them. It localises food systems rather than dependence on inequitable global trade. It puts control locally instead of by unaccountable corporations. It builds knowledge and skills that conserve and develop local food production and rejects alien technologies such as GMOs. It works with nature in diverse agroecological systems rather than energy-intensive production methods which damage the environment and contribute to global warming.

What is required of the Parties to the CBD is to put biodiversity-based agriculture at its core. The Parties should call for regulation of industrial food systems that destroy this biodiversity. They should also increase priority for the conservation and development of agricultural biodiversity, and the enhancement of ecosystem functions, in agroecological systems managed by food providers where they live – on-farm by small-scale farmers, on the range by pastoralists, in inland and coastal waters by artisanal fisherfolk...

...and policies and practices are needed that will facilitate an increase in exchanges of GM-free seeds, livestock breeds and other genetic resources for food and agriculture, between communities, countries and continents. For example, more exchanges of diverse seeds between farmers in warmer areas to those in cooler areas, between those in wetter areas to others in drier areas and vice versa.

Yet, existing policies, laws, trade agreements, commercial contracts and technologies increasingly prevent seed saving, limit local livestock breeding and outlaw exchanges of seeds and livestock, thereby reducing adaptive capacity.

In the face of climate change, increasing adaptive capacity is non-negotiable. It is essential for mitigation but can only be achieved by having increased agricultural biodiversity, and its associated ecosystem functions, managed by local family and peasant farmers, pastoralists and artisanal fisherfolk and other local food providers. It requires the knowledge and skills of these small-scale food providers, their technologies and food sovereignty to achieve a resilient food system that will guarantee our future food in a warming world.

The Parties to the CBD need to seize this historic moment and:

- **Put culture back into agriculture**
- **Put biology back into biodiversity**
- **Put food sovereignty, food providers and their social organisations at the centre of agricultural biodiversity policy and practice**

Come and learn more about these vital issues from food providers themselves

SIDE EVENT: Agricultural Biodiversity for Food Sovereignty

WHEN: Tuesday 19 February 13:15 - Canada Room, Building A, Room 356 / 7

SPEAKERS: Via Campesina, the global farmers' movement

ROPFA, the West African network of family farmers and pastoralists

Organised by the CBD Alliance and the IPC for Food Sovereignty