



# The Karen Commitment

Proceedings of a Conference of  
Indigenous Livestock Breeding  
Communities on Animal Genetic  
Resources

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Indigenous Livestock Breeding Communities  
on Animal Genetic Resources**

**Karen, Kenya, 27–30 October 2003**

**Published by**

German NGO Forum on Environment & Development  
Am Michaelshof 8–10  
53177 Bonn, Germany  
Phone: +49-(0)228-359704  
Fax: +49-(0)228-92399356  
E-mail: [info@forumue.de](mailto:info@forumue.de)  
Internet: [www.forumue.de](http://www.forumue.de)

**Editors**

Ilse Köhler-Rollefson  
Jacob Wanyama

**Workshop documentation**

Kamwati Wango

**Copyediting and layout**

Paul Mundy, Bergisch Gladbach, [www.mamud.com](http://www.mamud.com)

**Cover photos**

Top: herders in Mongolia  
Middle: Ankole cattle, Uganda  
Bottom: Raika woman with sheep, India  
All photos courtesy of workshop participants

This document was produced and printed with the support of the Sector Project: Global Food Security of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the German NGO Forum on Environment and Development.

Printed by Knotenpunkt

Bonn, Germany, 2003

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# Foreword

Jacob Wanyama  
ITDG–East Africa

Ilse Köhler-Rollefson  
League for Pastoral Peoples

**P**astoralists and other indigenous livestock breeding communities have developed a large number of farm animal breeds with unique genetic adaptations. In times of widespread, indiscriminate crossbreeding or substitution with exotic breeds, these marginalized people have acted as custodians of pure breeds that represent the result of many generations of traditional knowledge and active genetic manipulation for certain culturally defined criteria. It is now acknowledged that these breeds are often endowed with very desirable genetic traits, such as disease resistance, fertility and general fitness, which are not present in the genetic make-up of high-performance animals.

In general, these breeds are not protected by any intellectual property regime. This renders them vulnerable to biopiracy, since scientific and commercial interest in their genetic components is set to intensify. Breeding for disease resistance and genetic disease control is regarded as a promising new avenue in livestock production in view of the fact that many disease-causing organisms – worms, bacteria, viruses, and protozoa – are becoming increasingly resistant to drugs and vaccines.

Indigenous livestock breeders, as holders of the rights over these biological resources, thus represent prime stakeholders in the emerging debate about legal and regulatory frameworks for the sustainable use of farm animal genetic resources, including a ‘breed treaty’, as pendant to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources.

The Convention on Biological Diversity, in its Article 8j, also calls for recognition of the vast amount of *in-situ* conservation carried out by traditional communities. This call is reflected in Part III of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources, on ‘farmers’ rights’. The concept of Farmers’ Rights is based on the past, present and future contributions of farmers in conserving crop genetic diversity. This provision entitles farmers to the right to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed, to participate in decision-making, and in the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of plant genetic resources.

In the envisioned animal treaty, the equivalent to Farmers’ Rights would be ‘Livestock Keepers’ Rights’. This term was proposed and discussed during the NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty held parallel to the World Food Summit in June 2002.

What should such Livestock Keepers’ Rights entail? This is a question that must be debated and answered above all by the prime stakeholders themselves – by the many pastoralist and indigenous livestock-keeping communities. This was one of the main reasons for ITDG-EA and LPP to cooperate in organizing an international workshop to bring together as many representatives as possible from these communities and to facilitate discussion between themselves and with selected resource persons. The workshop had the following goals:

- To raise awareness among indigenous livestock-breeding communities about international developments and the global agenda with respect to livestock.
- To document the links of indigenous communities with particular livestock breeds.
- To showcase the importance of cultural diversity and diverse agricultural production systems for farm animal genetic diversity.
- To discover commonalities and differences, and maybe a common identity, between the various livestock-dependent groups.
- To develop strategies for influencing the international discussions on animal genetic resources from the grassroots perspective.
- To articulate the linkage between the sustainable use of livestock breeds and access to grazing and pastures.

Thanks to the participation of a large number of representatives from indigenous livestock-breeding communities, the workshop was successful in showcasing the significance of traditional knowledge and social systems for upholding farm animal genetic diversity. The papers by the resource persons also emphasized the need to safeguard the rights of these communities as laid down in the Convention on Biological Diversity.

This workshop was an important step toward the overall objective of official recognition of the enormous contribution of indigenous livestock-breeding communities to future food security. We would like to express our sincere thanks and enormous appreciations to both donors and participants for their contributions and dedication to the cause.

# Acknowledgements

The workshop reported in this document was organized by the Intermediate Technology Development Group–East Africa and the League for Pastoral Peoples.



ITDG–East Africa  
 PO Box 39493, 00623 Nairobi, Kenya  
 Tel: +254 2 2713540, 2715299, 2719313,  
 2719413  
 Fax: +254 2 2710083  
 Email: itdgEA@itdg.or.ke  
 www.itdg.org



LEAGUE FOR  
 PASTORAL PEOPLES

League for Pastoral Peoples  
 Pragerlatzstrasse 20, 64372 Ober-Ramstadt,  
 Germany  
 Tel/fax: +49 6154 53642  
 Email: info@pastoralpeoples.org  
 www.pastoralpeoples.org

The organizers wish to thank the workshop participants and all those involved in preparing and implementing the workshop. Special thanks to Patrick Mulvaney, Elzbieta Martyniuk and J Ekpere for their decisive inputs. Thanks also to FAO for supporting Ms Martyniuk's participation, and to Susanne Gura (IFOAM), Helen Ochieng (GTZ-Kenya) and Evelyn Mathias (LPP) for their enthusiastic support during the planning stages of the workshop.

The workshop was supported by the following:



Church Development Service

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Technical Centre for Agricultural and  
 Rural Cooperation (ACP-EU)



German Agency for Technical Cooperation  
 (GTZ), Managing Agrobiodiversity in Ru-  
 ral Areas Project



# The Karen Commitment on pastoralist/indigenous livestock keepers' rights

**W**e call on governments and relevant international bodies to commit themselves to the formal recognition of the historical and current contribution of pastoralists and pastoralism to food and livelihood security, environmental services and domestic animal diversity.

We also demand that they recognize the contributions of pastoralists and other livestock keepers, over millennia, to the conservation and sustainable use of animal genetic resources for food and agriculture (AnGRFA) including associated species and the genes they contain.

Furthermore, we insist that there is international legally-binding recognition of inalienable Livestock Keepers' Rights and the rights of their communities to:

- **Continue to use their knowledge** concerning the conservation and sustainable use of AnGRFA, without fears of its appropriation.
- **Participate democratically in making decisions** on matters related to the conservation and sustainable use of AnGRFA.
- **Access, save, use, exchange, sell their AnGRFA**, unrestricted by intellectual property rights (IPRs) and (modification through) genetic engineering technologies that we believe will disrupt the in-

tegrity of these genetic resources.

- **Have their breeds recognized** as products of their communities and indigenous knowledge, and therefore remain in the public domain.
- **Benefit equitably** from the use of AnGRFA in their own communities and by others.

We call on the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) to start negotiating such a legally binding agreement, without delay, ensuring that it will be in harmony with the Convention on Biological Diversity.

We further call on FAO to develop a **global plan for the conservation and sustainable use of AnGRFA** by pastoralists, other livestock keeping communities and relevant public institutions.

Finally, we insist that AnGRFA be **excluded from intellectual property rights** claims and that there should be a moratorium on the release of genetically modified livestock until biosafety is proven, in accordance with the precautionary principle. We call on relevant institutions concerned with food, agriculture, trade, intellectual property and animal research to provide assurances and such legal protection as are necessary to sustain the free flow and integrity of AnGRFA, vital to global food security and the environment.

# Workshop insights and recommendations

**P**astoralism makes an important contribution to

- Sustainable use of arid lands and other challenging environments
- Food security
- Creation of rural income opportunities and employment.

Furthermore, pastoralists fulfil a crucial, and so far overlooked, role for the future of humanity by conserving animal genetic diversity which is endangered by the expansion of industrial livestock production. Since pastoralists value and love animals beyond narrow economic considerations and have a deep knowledge about animal breeding and environmental management, they represent custodians of indigenous breeds with important genetic traits of value for all of humanity. This role needs to be widely recognized among governments, policymakers, and international bodies.

However, the continuity of pastoralism is threatened by governments' neglect or inadequate policies as well as the low status of this way of life, leading many young people to abandon this lifestyle, resulting in rural–urban migration.

The participants of the workshop which include representatives of pastoral communities from 12 countries from Africa, Asia and Europe recommend that:

## **Governments and regional bodies:**

- Strengthen the quality of FAO's State-of-the-World Report by involvement of pastoralists and NGOs in the documentation and including an indigenous knowledge dimension.
- Incorporate traditional knowledge into the education system, especially at the primary level.
- Develop regional frameworks to contribute to the Africa (and Asian) position at international negotiations.

## **Scientists and research institutes:**

- Modify scientific techniques to improve their understanding by local communities, respect indigenous knowledge and regard communities as equal partners in research.
- Cease research conducted without prior informed consent of the community concerned.

## **Pastoralists and civil society:**

- Translate results of this workshop and issue of Livestock Keepers' Rights into local languages and disseminate them to communities.
- Set up pastoral forums or umbrella organizations in each country and promote networking between them.

- Continue efforts to establish environmental, grazing, and conflict-resolution committees at local levels.
- Coordinate lobbying with respect to decision makers, opinion leaders and media.

### **Donors:**

- Consider their funding priorities with respect to scientific research not involving local communities.
  - Support pastoralist networks and institutions to create a global common identity.
- Support a financing mechanism for pastoralist representation in national, regional and international meetings with relevance to the conservation of animal genetic resources for food and agriculture (Convention on Biological Diversity/ Conference of the Parties, Food and Agriculture Organization, World Intellectual Property Organization, World Trade Organization, etc.).
  - Support research on indigenous knowledge about animal breeding to strengthen the case for pastoralists.