

Defend All Agricultural Biodiversity – it is much, much more than Seeds!

Patrick Mulvany, Practical Action. 25 October 2010

“Parties have much work to do: they must stop industrial agriculture, livestock factories, aquaculture and fisheries that damage biodiversity and prioritise work towards more biodiverse and ecological production, defending agricultural biodiversity and its ecosystem functions.”

The CBD is the defender of all agricultural biodiversity that feeds the world.

Agricultural biodiversity is, of course, more than genes and much, much more than farm seeds – it is the whole interrelated complex and functions of living organisms and the ecosystems that we use for our well being and planetary health. Yet, along with much of biodiversity, it is being lost at alarming rates due the ravages of industrial production. This is the challenge for COP 10 – how to stop the violation of the biodiversity that feeds the world and sustains the planet. The CBD should be the global defender of this complex sub-set of dynamic biodiversity that is developed by people to secure livelihoods, food supplies and a resilient environment.

Agricultural Biodiversity is inclusive and complex

Not only does Agricultural Biodiversity include crop and vegetable varieties but also livestock breeds and diverse aquatic and marine species and all the pollinators, predators, soil organisms and others in local agroecosystems, indeed all the 5668 species found in a healthy rice paddy ecosystem in Japan, for example. All are important components of agricultural biodiversity and the ecosystem functions that it performs. It has been described in documents welcomed by the CBD as: *“Agricultural biodiversity encompasses the variety and variability of animals, plants and micro-organisms which are necessary to sustain key functions of the agroecosystem, its structure and processes for, and in support of, food production and food security.”* And parties have recognised the *“...special nature of agricultural biodiversity, its distinctive features, and problems needing distinctive solutions”*. Parties have thus decided on comprehensive actions to address the conservation and sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity at genetic, species and ecosystem levels.

Since the landmark decision in Buenos Aires at COP 3, Decision III/11 including its seminal Annex 1 on the relation of agriculture with biodiversity, repeated COP Decisions have defended, in its entirety, the conservation and sustainable use of this vital sub-set of biodiversity that humans have adapted and developed to sustain life on Earth. Agricultural biodiversity is a product of diverse ecological food provision and an essential component of sustainable and resilient production in local ecosystems. It is sustained through localised conservation and development by knowledgeable small-scale food providers, especially women. Agricultural biodiversity defends our food supplies in the face of climate change.

The CBD with FAO have developed processes that need more support

Under guidance from COP, FAO and CBD in close collaboration have developed norms, the International Seed Treaty (IT PGRFA) and programmes of work that aim to stem the haemorrhage of agricultural biodiversity. The CBD Programme of Work on Agricultural Biodiversity does much to improve conservation of essential components and functions of biodiverse agroecosystems e.g. pollinators and it could do more. It provides a broad ecosystem framework for the Multi-Year Programme of Work of the FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, which covers all types of species from mammals to micro-organisms. It also provides an opportunity for the implementation of the findings of the scientific, peer-reviewed International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology (IAASTD), sponsored by the World Bank and UN organisations and approved by 58 governments, that calls for a radical change towards more biodiverse and ecological forms of production.

COP 10 must act decisively to radically change the way agricultural biodiversity is used and misused

Parties at COP 10 have a significant challenge to defend their work on agricultural biodiversity from one that supports narrow proprietary and sectional interests that would reduce local diversity, increase contamination of seeds and restrict access to these essential resources for food provision. COP must outlaw the privatisation of agricultural biodiversity, prohibit the release of GMOs especially in the centres of origin and diversity, and ensure continued access to seeds – it must ensure that the operative decisions on GURTs are not ‘retired’ and that the moratorium on Terminator technologies is retained. But do not forget that Agricultural Biodiversity is more than seeds: there are equivalent threats to livestock, forest and aquatic and marine diversity and productive ecosystems that must equally be resisted.

Parties have much work to do: they must stop industrial agriculture, livestock factories, aquaculture and fisheries that damage biodiversity and prioritise work towards more biodiverse and ecological production, defending agricultural biodiversity and its ecosystem functions, in the framework of food sovereignty.

Agricultural Biodiversity is a vital component of the CBD’s contribution to sustaining Life on Earth: the CBD’s work on this must be implemented fully and urgently to meet the challenges of securing future food in a warming world.

For more, see CBD Alliance Briefing on agricultural biodiversity: www.ukabc.org/agriculturalbiodiversity-briefing-cop10.pdf