

# Food, hunger and agricultural biodiversity: The security of food supplies depends on decisive CBD action

## CBD Alliance Media Briefing No.1

**A major challenge: CBD / COP 9 must agree a programme that will stem the loss of agricultural biodiversity. This special sub-set of biodiversity is developed by knowledgeable farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples and other food providers who work with nature to secure food supplies. They conserve the agricultural biodiversity, that adapts to changing needs and conditions including climate change, which underpins all food production.**

**Critical losses of agricultural biodiversity:** What is clear is that the losses of agricultural biodiversity are now at danger levels. More than 90% of crop varieties have disappeared from farmers' fields. One livestock breed out of the few thousand still alive becomes extinct every month. All major fisheries are overfished. And associated agricultural biodiversity – such as pollinators, predators, soil micro-organisms and diverse ecosystems - which provide support to agriculture and maintain the biosphere, are all disappearing fast. Seeds and livestock genes stored in gene banks can provide a backup, if freely accessible by those who provided them, but should only be regarded as a 'last resort' when all genetic materials have been lost in farming and pastoral communities. They can only store historical diversity, not current diversity that is developing in farmers' fields and on the range. The future security of all food supplies and the health of the planet are in a critical state because of these losses.

**Rapidly increasing corporate control:** Agricultural biodiversity is being lost as a result of the elimination of small-scale food producers and harvesters, taking their knowledge and skills with them. The losses are exacerbated by increased corporate control of the food chain from seed to sewer, the spread of industrial monocultures, and the privatisation of life through commercial contracts, seed laws, patents, intellectual property rights and proprietary GM seeds. The ten largest seed and genetics corporations control nearly 60% of the global seed market and just four companies provide the genetics globally for industrial poultry production.

**Terminator threat:** Corporate control will be strengthened by Terminator technology – a genetic modification that disrupts germination of farm-saved seeds and prevents seed saving so that farmers have to buy expensive new seeds from these corporations each season. COP 8 in 2006 upheld the moratorium on the release and use of Terminator technology, yet the EU with others continue to develop such technologies through its 'transcontainer' project. Fashioning itself as a potential GMO containment tool that will reverse the seed sterility of Terminator seed, Transcontainer is just another form of Terminator technology.

**Food vs. Fuel:** Corporations are now pushing agriculture to produce fuel rather than food. The CBD's call for a moratorium on agrofuel targets is being blocked by a few countries. The targets are causing widespread conversion of productive land and grazing areas intended for production of food to industrial fuel production. Agrofuel plantations are already destroying the remaining rainforest reserves in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia pushing farming communities to abandon food production. Agrofuel production is irreversibly displacing agricultural biodiversity.

**Perverse subsidies:** The influence of a few corporations on key governments is weakening the CBD's ability to make the necessary decisions. Agriculture subsidies in OECD countries are around €240 billion annually, but two thirds of them have been found to damage biodiversity. These perverse subsidies, which some governments refuse to recognise as a problem, are taking their toll. They eliminate small-scale agroecological production and erode agricultural biodiversity. Similarly, unfair trade and neoliberal trade agreements, particularly those that favour food and agribusiness corporations and undermine biodiverse farming, are not accepted as causes of biodiversity loss by a few CBD Parties.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Alliance is a loose network of civil society representatives. The CBD Alliance facilitated the development of this media briefing, to which some thirty organisations from North and global South contributed. The briefing should not be understood as the views of the CBD Alliance, nor of civil society in general, but as background information on some CBD issues from the views of some civil society representatives.

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**Land tenure reform**, as part of an agrarian reform process – one that provides access to and control over land by poor people - is essential to enhance agricultural biodiversity and reduce pressure on wild biodiversity as well as eliminating rural poverty. Smallholdings are proven to have higher productivity per unit area and are demonstrably biodiverse while large commercial farms eliminate biodiversity by growing monocultures. The rapid acquisition of land by commercial farms is posing a new threat to agricultural biodiversity and will accentuate the food crisis. Access to and collective control over land by small-scale food providers will enhance biodiversity and improve rural livelihoods and must no longer be ignored.

**Radical changes essential:** The International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) has added a scientifically supported warning signal: unless there are radical changes to the way agriculture is developed, how natural resources are used and how food systems and research are governed, the future production and provision of food cannot be sustained. There will be further social unrest caused by food shortages, more hunger and increased environmental damage from current unsustainable food production methods. The 2000+ pages of evidence and analysis in the recently released IAASTD report, accepted in April 2008 by 60 governments, was produced by 400 scientists in a thorough, four year, peer-reviewed process.

According to IAASTD, smaller-scale, biodiverse, agroecological agriculture is the way forward. Agroecological systems with thriving ecosystem functions are more resilient to shocks than those dependent on agrochemicals and can help agriculture to adapt to climate change; to build organic matter in the soil that sequesters carbon dioxide and improves water retention; to secure local food systems, and to feed the hungry, whose numbers would otherwise increase as the world population is expected to rise towards 1.1 billion by 2050.

With the incontrovertible and accepted evidence of the IAASTD in the hands of Parties to the CBD, COP 9 must now take bold decisions and set targets to ensure that all Parties are obliged to transform agriculture and reverse the decline of agricultural biodiversity in all agroecosystems. COP must implement legally-binding rules to stop agrofuel targets; to outlaw the privatisation of all life and other natural resources; to ban Terminator technologies; and to end perverse subsidies. The COP must incorporate these rules in a strong agricultural biodiversity programme that puts food sovereignty, farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk and other food providers and their social organisations at the centre of agricultural biodiversity policy and practice.

#### **For further information:**

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#### **See also:**

Background: [www.cbdalliance.org/agricultural-biodiversity/](http://www.cbdalliance.org/agricultural-biodiversity/) & [www.ukabc.org](http://www.ukabc.org)  
Review of SBSTTA 13 agricultural biodiversity debate and challenges for COP 9:  
[www.twinside.org.sg/title2/susagri/susagri026.htm](http://www.twinside.org.sg/title2/susagri/susagri026.htm) &  
[www.twinside.org.sg/title2/susagri/susagri027.htm](http://www.twinside.org.sg/title2/susagri/susagri027.htm)  
For more on Food Sovereignty: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food\\_sovereignty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_sovereignty)