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ECO

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Submissions to ECO:
NGO representatives are invited to submit articles and announcements to ECO via the following:

- 1) e-mail: barbarag@elciafrica.org
- 2) labelled 3.5 diskette or written document. Drop off in box marked "ECO submission" at ELCI display area in the corridor.

A Fair COP for Biosafety, Farmers' Rights & Food Security?

By Don Redding, ITDG

On her eight acres of earth, 90 kilometres from the nearest tarmac road, with nothing but scrub between her and the dusty, hungry regions of Wajir, Somalia and the Ogaden to the north, Jane Kirambia scratches out a living.

Last year, when the rains failed again, her margins were squeezed tight. Her husband's wages as a schoolteacher saved her from selling any of the animals, but it was a close call.

Yet Jane is a success. She and her three children did not starve, nor did they depend on relief. The animals remained healthy, and this January her crops were once again standing tall in the field. Close attention to her science explains why.

She intercrosses her produce, using nitrogen-fixing cowpeas between the rows of grain, and mixing grains within one plot to ensure the soil is not exhausted. She pens her animals at night, using the dung for organic manure. She maintains a small nursery, continually experimenting with new plants - mango seedlings this year.

She expands the family diet by finding new ways to support vegetables in this harsh dry climate. The latest is a drip irrigation kit - little more than a bucket draining into a length of hose with regularly spaced holes - which has produced a bumper crop of tomatoes.

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A Farmer Speaks

"When we heard about this opportunity to come to Kenya and talk about how we farm we wanted to come and show our seeds to the people at the conference. But when we got to Harare, we were told by the authorities that we could not take our seeds outside of the country. We were told that they were not good enough for Zimbabwe to export. We were surprised! Are these our seeds? If not, whose are they? We often get our seeds from our friends in other places, and we wanted to share our seeds. Can anyone explain to us why we cannot take our seeds when we travel?"

Meshak Mutapwa, farmer from Zimbabwe



Above all, she maintains variety. Jane Kirambia grows up to ten varieties each of sorghum, millet and maize. Many of them are locally developed, locally adapted varieties known only by dialect names and mysterious to research institutes. By growing them together, she is spreading her risk and increasing her options.

A variety of grain crops means she won't starve if one fails. It also prevents a concentration of killer pests. Local adaptations mean her varieties may be better suited to the soils, the aspects, and most importantly the drought conditions found in Maragwa location in northern Kenya, where she and 20,000 others live.

So while 16 million people across East Africa are said to be at risk of famine, Jane and her family are unlikely to be among the statistics - despite a climate in which, as an ITDG project manager puts it, "four out of five rainy seasons may fail".

Farmer nurturing agricultural biodiversity in his field. Photo by Panos.

If the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers like Jane Kirambia are under threat, it is not necessarily from the weather. The greater menace may be the loss of agricultural biodiversity -

the vast range of seeds, soil microbes and animal forms which have been developed and managed by these farmers over centuries.

Jane and her peers have no words in their language for 'agricultural biodiversity', yet it is the stuff of life itself. It provides the livelihoods for up to 80 per cent of the population in Kenya and developing countries like it. More than that, it provides the food security for a quarter of humanity.

Some 1.6 billion people make ends meet thanks to farm-saved seed. Yet a small handful of multinational companies now control the commercial seed trade around the world. The industrialised farming model, involving production for sale, monocropping, and dependence on commercial seed and associated chemical packages, and which is promoted and protected by international instruments from the World Trade Organisation's rules to the structural adjustment policies which force developing country governments to emphasise export crops, is rapidly pushing its way into the last corners of the market.

If farmers in Maragwa have a poor year, they must get new seed from somewhere. Whether it is government relief or the market, it will be commercial seed, with a limited number of varieties produced for a generic goal of 'higher yield' which takes no account of conditions in this or any other individual locality. It will be promoted by government and local authorities, by national seed institutes and commercial agents.

As a result of this model, up to 70 per cent of some seed varieties has been lost this century. The recent coming to market of genetically modified crops, claiming to 'feed the third world', is but the latest of the commercially developed false dawns.

There are some answers to these threats. Some are local. Jane and her neighbours have set up community seed banks where local varieties can be stored and later loaned to members for the next planting. Every March they participate in a seed fair inspired by ITDG where they can exchange their varieties and knowledge with other farmers from the location.

But for such grassroots efforts to succeed with any real scope across developing countries, they need to be backed by a new approach to sustainable agriculture, and to protecting farmers' rights to continue developing and benefiting from the genetic resources for agriculture which they themselves have developed, without fear of the biopiracy, patenting of life forms, and intrusions of externally-driven 'miracle' crops. And that policy approach in turn needs an international instrument as powerful as the WTO to recognise and protect it.

As Jane clears her fields for the next planting, over 170 national delegations are here to discuss the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) at the fifth Conference of the Parties (COP V).

So far the CBD has mainly been used to protect 'naturally occurring' life forms in, for example, original wetland areas. But increasingly it has begun to recognise the special nature of

agricultural biodiversity – special because it has been developed by people, to sustain people. And like the WTO, the CBD is a global instrument which is legally binding upon its members.

Had the WTO started a new round of trade talks last November in Seattle, agricultural trade, and the international property rights which have slowly but surely permitted biopiracy, would have been re-regulated to the further detriment of developing country farmers. Following Seattle's failure, the space has opened for the CBD to come into its own.

At this conference, the same nations who are members of the WTO can set a rather different policy direction. They can sign up to, and bring into force a Biosafety Protocol which will allow countries to protect their smallholder farmers by refusing to accept GM imports. They can recognise the paramount importance of agricultural biodiversity and commit themselves - and some global finance—to plans of action to support it.

That means backing farmers like Jane Kirambia, building their capacity and their institutional support to manage agricultural biodiversity, and in the process to sustain their own livelihoods and the food security of their communities against threats like the current East African drought.

To add a little extra pressure, ITDG, ActionAid and their partners will be bringing farmers from across Kenya and other countries in the region to the heart of the policy process, to tell the delegations what support they need. And in the very venue of COP V itself, will hold a seed fair to show the policy makers what their reams of rhetoric on agricultural biodiversity are really about.

The farmers, in collaboration with ITDG, Action Aid and other partners, invite delegates to the official opening of the seed fair, in the lobby of the UNEP building, Gigiri on 15th May 2000 at 1.00pm.

Farmer Seed Fair



What is it?

Every year, after the harvest, farmers come together for a day to display the season's crops and seeds.

Why?

The seed fair give recognition to farmers' local crop varieties, and encourages them to conserve and share a wider variety of crops in the fields. The fair also provides an opportunity for all farmers in the community to exchange or purchase seeds from the exhibitors. It provides a forum for farmers to share existing local knowledge and skills in farming

Official opening of the Seed Fair

Lobby of the UNEP Building

15th may at 1:00 p.m.

Lunch will be served.

Announcements

- All delegates who have not received Nature Kenya/BirdLife International postcards on threatened birds of East Africa can obtain a set at the BirdLife international/Nature Kenya stand.
- The Farmers Seed Fair Sponsored by ITDG, ActionAid and other partners will be at the UNEP Lobby at 1 o'clock on 16th of May.
- During the CBD, there will be an NGO coordinating meeting each day at 9 am. Location to be announced at the ELCI display table, and in future editions of ECO.
- NGO representatives wishing to help put ECO together can meet at the Palm (or Jacaranda?) Room at Landmark Hotel, at 8:00 p.m. each evening. This venue is also available to NGOs wishing to hold meetings in the evenings to address upcoming COP agenda items
- Parallel conference:
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MEDICINAL PLANTS, TRADITIONAL MEDICINES & LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES OF THE NEW MILLENIUM, May 16-19, ICRAF, Lundgren Auditorium, co-convoked by Environment Liaison Centre International and Global Initiative for Traditional Systems of Health.
- Upcoming topics of ECO, for which we invite articles, are:
Tuesday, May 16: Traditional Knowledge and Agricultural Biodiversity
Wednesday, May 17: Dryland Biodiversity
Thursday, May 18: Inland Water Biodiversity , Clearing House Mechanism
Friday, May 19: Agricultural biodiversity, Identification, monitoring and assessment
Monday, May 22: Alien species, Education and Public Awareness
Tuesday, May 23: Global Taxonomy Initiative, Impact Assessment
Wednesday, May 24: Biosafety and Biotechnology
Thursday, May 25: Summary statements from NGOs on the operations of the Convention

Bird Walks

Bird walks will be offered by Nature Kenya for COP attendees from 8:30-9:30 on Thursday, May 18 and on Tuesday and Thursday May 23 and 25 on UNEP campus. Meet at the main entrance to the UNEP building, in front of the business centre.

Saturday Morning, May 20, Special Bird Walk for CBD COP delegates and resident Nairobi birders. Meet at National Museum car park at 9:00.

Wednesday Bird Walk: Bird watching walks at sites in and around Nairobi. Meet at the National Museum car park every Wednesday at 8:45 a.m. Return about 12:30 p.m. Those who are not members can get temporary membership at Kshs 100 per birdwalk, payable on arrival at the car park.

Pot Luck Outing, May 21: Bird-watching outings held on every third Sunday of the month, i.e., 21 May. Bring a picnic lunch (most hotels can provide if asked), binoculars, field guides, etc. and meet at 9:00 am at the National Museum car park. Those attending decide on the venue - hence "Pot Luck".

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