



International Planning Committee (IPC) for Food Sovereignty

Working group on agricultural biodiversity



**Statement of the Working Group on Agricultural Biodiversity of the
International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty
on the occasion of the
FAO World Conference on the Green Development of the Seed Industry**

We, the IPC member organisations of small food producers and Indigenous Peoples, are outraged by the uncontrolled and increasingly aggressive penetration of industry into the offices of the FAO and by the acquiescence of governments to such a power grab in a UN agency.

Only a year ago, we denounced the dangerous partnership between the FAO and CropLife¹, an organisation representing the interests of the world's largest agrochemical industries, reminding the FAO that small-scale food producers are not part of the private sector and that small-scale food producers' organisations meet the criteria of CSOs. Unfortunately, we realise that the position taken by the FAO is totally contrary to this and to its own mandate.

The World Conference on Green Development of the Seed Industry (hereinafter the "Conference"), scheduled for 4-5 November 2021, is proving to be another step in the imposition of the seed industry's agenda within the FAO. The FAO, in contradiction with its charter, is about to open a new political process orchestrated by the seed industry, where there is no real contradiction and the narrative is one-sided. This conference seems to contradict the work of the FAO itself: according to data from the 2019 State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture report², among the main drivers of global biodiversity loss are "*changes in land and water use and management, pollution, overexploitation and harvesting, climate change, and population growth and urbanisation*". Most of these causes of biodiversity loss are consequences of industrial agriculture itself; in 2021, the UNEP report "Food System Impacts on Biodiversity Loss"³ clearly identifies the current food system as the main cause of biodiversity loss. Based on these data, the celebration of this conference between the 26th UN Conference on Climate Change and the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity is a further support by the FAO to the strategies of the big seed companies that dominate the global market.

The very foundations of the conference are polluted by the presence of industrial interests: the steering committee is composed of representatives of agribusiness or researchers who favour the use of biotechnology in agriculture. The documents published in preparation for the event present an industrial discourse that praises the "*essential contribution of quality seeds of improved plant varieties to the transformation of agri-food systems, to environmental protection and to the livelihoods of farmers and rural communities worldwide*" as the only solution to combat "*unprecedented challenges, such as climate change and world population growth*"⁴.

¹ <https://www.foodsovereignty.org/fao-and-croplife/>

² <https://www.fao.org/3/CA3129EN/CA3129EN.pdf>

³ <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/our-global-food-system-primary-driver-biodiversity-loss>

⁴ Report of the Steering Committee of the World Conference on Green Development of the Seed Industry: <https://www.fao.org/3/cb6581en/cb6581en.pdf>



We recognise that this conference is part of the direction that the FAO wants to take to support industrial agriculture, which - let's remember - accounts for only 25% of global food production (FAO, 2014).

We are aware that the objectives presented in the FAO strategic framework for the period 2022-2031 through the "four priorities" - namely better production, better nutrition, better environment and better life, leaving no one behind - can only be achieved through a complete paradigm shift in food production, placing small-scale food producers and local communities at the centre of the strategy. The food industries must not be allowed to once again be at the centre of global policy: they are the main drivers of climate change and global biodiversity loss.

With this conference, small-scale food producers are completely deprived of their role, despite their primary role in food production, as recognised by the FAO⁵ itself and other UN agencies such as IFAD⁶, and that this recognition also extends to their role in the conservation of agricultural biodiversity, as recognised by the CBD⁷. As always, the industry presents itself as the benefactor that "*offers farmers a choice about what solutions to provide and how they can access those solutions*". However, the voices of the grassroots, i.e. farmers and Indigenous Peoples, will not be heard at this meeting. The lack of participation in the conference does not respect the principles of the FAO strategy for partnership with CSOs⁸, which foresees the participation of CSOs in policy, normative and technical discussions organised by FAO.

While the report of the Organising Committee states that "*farmer-managed seed systems and farmers' rights to select and conserve plant genetic resources are important*", it does not mention that they form the basis of livelihoods for about 44% of the world's population.⁹ The existence and importance of farmer and Indigenous Peoples' managed seed systems is also the subject of international law instruments, both binding, such as the ITPGRFA, and indicative, such as UNDROP¹⁰ and UNDRIP¹¹.

We are also concerned about the "FAQ document"¹², which clearly supports the seed industry by stating that "*current cultivars will have to be replaced by more diverse, intra- and inter-specific, productive, nutritious, stress-tolerant and low-input cultivars*". The FAO is supposed to be a neutral space, as the FAQ document also states; however, it is clear that neutrality is not possible in a forum where the language used to present the issues is predetermined in relation to the conclusions the conference wishes to reach.

The Conference documents describe peasant and Indigenous Peoples' seed systems as "*inefficient*" and state that "*smallholder farmers, who generally subsist on precarious, low-input production systems and who, together with their households, are vulnerable to food insecurity and*

⁵ <https://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1395127/icode/>

⁶ <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/latest/-/blog/why-small-farms-are-key-to-the-future-of-food-and-how-we-can-support-them>

⁷ CDB CoP IX, Décision IX/1. <https://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=11644>

⁸ <https://www.fao.org/3/I3443E/i3443e.pdf>.

⁹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>

¹⁰ <https://www.fao.org/plant-treaty/tools/toolbox-for-sustainable-use/details/en/c/1373893/>

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

¹² <https://www.fao.org/3/ng989en/ng989en.pdf>



malnutrition, need these more productive and nutritious [i.e. industry] crop varieties"¹³. Such statements deliberately ignore the structural factors that marginalise small-scale food producers, such as lack of control over land and land grabbing, conflict, occupation and war, natural disasters caused by climate change, discriminatory trade and market rules and draconian intellectual property regimes. Indeed, patents and plant variety protection (PVP) laws, such as the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) system, undermine the collective rights of farmers and Indigenous Peoples over their seeds. Recognising the fact that "*rates of adoption of new and improved crop varieties and hence replacement of old low-yielding varieties that are susceptible to biotic and abiotic stresses and have poor nutritional qualities [sic], are low*", the Conference aims to stimulate such adoption. Among the interventions that will be needed to achieve this goal, the conference documents highlight the facilitation of international seed trade, the harmonisation of legal frameworks and the promotion of technologies such as gene editing, genetic sequencing, synthetic biology, microbiomics, machine learning and artificial intelligence.¹⁴

This distorted reading runs counter to the recommendations of the FAO technical committees¹⁵ and the text of the treaty.

It is in the interest of small-scale food producers and Indigenous Peoples that we denounce the power that the seed industry has at the FAO, insofar as it wants to determine the global policy agenda. It is necessary to support and guarantee farmers' rights. We will continue to fight for a democratic and fair decision-making space on food and agricultural issues.

We call on the Director-General of FAO and all FAO member states to

- Ensure that FAO respects its mandate as the UN multilateral agency responsible for promoting the human right to food and nutrition, and take effective measures to end undue corporate influence on its strategic direction and work;
- End the partnership with CropLife and all other partnerships with agribusiness companies and organisations, and develop an effective conflict of interest policy for its cooperation with the private sector and philanthropic institutions through a transparent and participatory process;
- Consistently implement FAO's strategy for partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), effectively recognizing small-scale food producers as rights holders and key actors in food security;
- Ensure that the new FAO Strategic Framework 2022-2031, to be discussed at the next FAO Conference, is conducive to the universal realization of the human right to food and nutrition, while ensuring in particular the respect, protection and promotion of the rights of small food producers;

¹³ <https://www.fao.org/3/ng989en/ng989en.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Implementation of the recommendations of the 26th Session of the Committee
<https://www.fao.org/3/nd380en/nd380en.pdf>



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- Intensify efforts to realise the rights of peasants and Indigenous Peoples over their seeds and related knowledge, practices and innovations, as guaranteed by the ITPGRFA, CBD, UNDRIP and UNDROP;
- Prioritise the transition to agroecology as the main means to achieve FAO's goals, to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity and to address climate change, based on the ten elements of agroecology adopted by the FAO Council¹⁶;
- Consistently and rigorously apply the precautionary principle in the context of biotechnology and other emerging technologies, and comply with international law in this context;
- Refrain from precluding the outcome of the ongoing discussions in various UN fora on "digital sequence information" (DSI), and defend farmers' rights in this context.

¹⁶ <https://www.fao.org/3/ca7173en/ca7173en.pdf>