



THE FAO CONFERENCE ON THE GREEN DEVELOPMENT OF SEEDS INDUSTRY: THE COMMODIFICATION OF LIFE

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The FAO Conference on the Green Development of Seeds Industry started on Thursday 4 November and we are certainly not surprised by the organisation and content of these two days, which were a showcase for the agribusiness industry.

The first day began with an introduction to the Conference by Beth Bechdol, Deputy Director-General of FAO. Ms. Bechdol, who we know has a brilliant past as President and CEO of Agrinovus Indiana, a large industrial agriculture technology company, reminded us that "As we have just concluded the G20 and soon the CoP26 this is the right moment to rethink on how best to make quality seeds of preferred, productive, nutritious and resilient crop varieties so that they are available to smallholder farmers". Certainly a statement in line with the spirit demonstrated by the various heads of state attending the G20, but one that does not align with the serious loss of biodiversity that our planet is facing. According to the CBD, "Cultivated species are an important source of nutrition, yet of the more than 6000 plant species that have been cultivated for food, only 9 species account for 66% of total crop production" . Even the FAO Treaty Secretary Kent Nnandozie, reminded the conference of the importance of protecting agricultural biodiversity, yet from the outset the content proposed by the conference was pre-packaged in a pro-industry narrative that would like to see an ever more concentrated selection of varieties so as to increase profits.

1: <https://www.cbd.int/agro/>

The Director-General of FAO Qu Dongyu,, during his opening speech, stated that "We need to produce 50% more of food to feed everyone. The only way to achieve this target is by increasing global productivity, or other productivity based on plant production. Animal feeds, also, mainly comes from crop production, that's why I started to a better production from the crops first, then from the animal, then from the fisheries and then aquaculture of course. Through the science and innovation, that is the only solution!" The IPC has a very different idea. As we have often mentioned, and as can be read in the declaration that was published on the occasion of the Conference and which is open for signature by organisations, movements and academics, "industrial agriculture, [...] accounts for only 25% of global food production (FAO, 2014)". That's why we've advocated for 25 years for the FAO to support peasant agriculture: farms below two hectares represent 84% of the 608 million farms in the world, and are capable to cover more than a third² of the global food production, using just the 12% of the agricultural land. Smallholders, not industrial farmers, should be the people to help with subsidies and policy frameworks.

But this wasn't the aim of the Conference. As we had denounced, this space proved to be anything but neutral. Among today's panelists, CropTrust, International Seeds Federation and Global Crop Diversity Trust certainly stand out.

CropTrust, at the start of its afternoon presentation, said that "the economic value framework is the basis of PGRFA, as are many other commodities". De-commodification of food, respect for human rights and redistribution of resources are transformation necessary and revolutionary³, and it is not by following the path set out by CropTrust and this Conference that we will make the changes necessary to safeguard global agricultural biodiversity a reality. Also following this narrative that does not allow for contradiction, Corteva Agriscience⁴ claims that ""gene editing" is the most sustainable technology", despite the fact that to date we do not even know the possible impacts that these technologies could have on the environment if released, not to mention the consequences that these technologies have on the effective application of farmers' rights⁵.

On the morning of 5 November, the second day of the conference, one of the topics discussed was seed systems. It goes without saying that the narrative of the various presentations was one-sided, a narrative built on the false assumption that farmers' seed systems are not able to meet the challenges of the short-term future, such as global population growth and climate change.

2 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X2100067X?via%3Dihub#!>

3 <https://www.foodsovereignty.org/statement-following-the-ipc-virtual-general-meeting/>

4 Born out of the Agriculture Division of DowDuPont, which has now become Dow, DuPont and Pioneer, seed and agrochemical industries.

5 https://www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GUIDE_Implementation-FRs_ENG.pdf

Farmers are denied their age-old role, acknowledged by the United Nations⁶ itself, as conservators and developers of agricultural biodiversity: they are seen as just a cog in a big machine to which they hand over inputs for more monetarily efficient production. Farmers thus lose the active role intrinsically linked to the territories in which they live and work, becoming recipients of commercial products that "must be convinced to use" because they are better for the turnover of the seed and the agricultural industry. According to UPOV, farmers should also recognise the role of breeders as they are fundamental in solving not only their needs and expectations, but also those of consumers. To do so, farmers' rights to seeds should be regulated by seed laws and regulations, such as intellectual property laws.

This is profoundly flawed and wrong in every respect, it is an outright manipulation of reality by the politics of capital that wants us to believe that today we need natural resources to be somehow acquired by industries so that they can protect them, when it is the same industries and the laws that have so far allowed the patenting of the world's genetic resources that have caused the severe loss of biodiversity that we face. Global biodiversity suffers profoundly because of the genetic homogeneity of patented seeds, a homogeneity that patents demand to be stable over time, effectively prohibiting natural evolution and adaptation of varieties. By forcing farmers to produce only varieties derived from patented seeds, we would have varieties that are unable to adapt and defend themselves against external agents that are constantly evolving and changing. Farmers, on the other hand, lose their right to choose what to grow, their control over the inputs needed to produce and over production itself. Farmers are criminalised for their age-old practices, and in some countries even lose their personal freedom due to discriminatory trade and market rules and draconian intellectual property regimes.

The FAO, according to its role and mission, should defend the importance of peasant and indigenous seed systems, refusing partnerships with industries that pursue their only interest - to have a rich budget at the end of the year - because this is in clear opposition to the mission of the agency itself, which is to solve world hunger.

It is not the free market in food and resources that will save biodiversity and feed the growing global population, and the failure of the UN Food and Agriculture Agency to recognise this must be a common concern for all.

⁶ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas](#)