



This project has received funding from the European Union's H2020 Programme under grant agreement no 633571

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FARMERS' RIGHTS

Farmers' contribution to agrobiodiversity

Since the dawn of agriculture, farmers all over the world have sown, harvested and selected seed and planting material, actively exchanging these resources among each other. In so doing they have developed an incredible abundance of crops, their knowledge and skills paving the way for the food plants that we use in agriculture and breeding today. This indispensable contribution to shaping the world's agrobiodiversity has been largely unnoticed and unrewarded. Moreover, the global transformation of agricultural systems worldwide is increasingly threatening their important role in this respect.

That is why an entire article of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (www.planttreaty.org), a legally binding international agreement adopted in 2001, is devoted to Farmers' Rights (Art. 9). The key objectives of the Plant Treaty are the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, facilitated access to these for research, breeding and training purposes, and the equitable sharing of the benefits derived from their use. Protecting and enhancing Farmers' Rights is crucial to achieving the Treaty's objectives.

The Plant Treaty and Farmers' Rights

The more than 140 countries that are parties to the Plant Treaty recognise that the past, present and future contribution of farmers in all regions of the world in conserving, improving and making available crop genetic resources constitutes the basis of all food and agriculture production, and of Farmers' Rights. The Plant Treaty provides some general directions and recommendations on how to implement Farmers' Rights: the protection of traditional knowledge; the right to equitable benefit sharing; the right to participate in relevant decision making at the national level; the rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed and propagules. However, the responsibility for defining and implementing Farmers' Rights is placed with national governments.

While the Plant Treaty does not oblige member countries to adopt any specific norm for Farmers' Rights, its provisions, however, provide an important framework for the development of relevant national policy measures. The DIVERSIFOOD project aims at contributing to the development of meaningful policy frameworks.

Contributing to shaping international norms on Farmers' Rights

DIVERSIFOOD evaluates and enriches the diversity of cultivated plants within diverse agro-ecosystems to improve their performance, resilience and quality. As such, the project can be seen as a direct contribution to the implementation of the Plant Treaty.

AT FIRST GLANCE

Realising Farmers' Rights means enabling farmers to maintain and develop crop genetic resources, and rewarding them for their indispensable contribution to agrobiodiversity worldwide

Embedding crop diversity and
networking for local high quality
food systems

A central feature of DIVERSIFOOD is its multi-actor approach, where farmers and their organisations across Europe are at the core, and which emphasises the collaboration with breeders, scientists and actors along the food chain. This approach provides the project with direct access to the views of farmers engaged in diversified farming. This is particularly valuable for evaluating the legislation related to diversified farming in Europe, which also forms part of the project. Legal space for farmers to continue to save, use, exchange and sell seed and plant propagating material is a crucial condition for maintaining and enhancing the diversity of cultivated plants. Current legislation in the EU poses severe restrictions on these practices, hence affecting Farmers' Rights as provided in the Treaty. Therefore, an important message from DIVERSIFOOD on Farmers' Rights in Europe is that formal and informal/local seed systems are complementary and that it is essential to ensure the legal space for both systems to make their contributions to the conservation and sustainable use of crop genetic resources. The specific needs of local seed systems must be safeguarded.



The way forward

The norms on Farmers' Rights are shaped in an ongoing process under the Plant Treaty. The Governing Body of the Plant Treaty is its highest decision-making body and convenes biennially. At each session, a resolution is adopted on Farmers' Rights, reflecting the consensus among the contracting parties. Between the sessions, international multi-stakeholder consultations are held. DIVERSIFOOD-partner Fridtjof Nansen Institute of Norway has been centrally involved in most consultations to date, as co-organizer and/or co-chair, and participates in the sessions of the Governing Body as well. Central recommendations from the consultations concern the participatory development of voluntary guidelines for the realisation of Farmers' Rights, and recommendations for improving national legislation so as to enable a balanced regulation for all types of seed and seed systems. A breakthrough for these recommendations will be needed to ensure progress in the realisation of Farmers' Rights.

Suggested readings

- Andersen, R. and Winge, T. (eds.) (2013) *Realising Farmers' Rights to Crop Genetic Resources: Success Stories and Best Practices*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Andersen, R. (2005) *The Farmers' Rights Project – Background Study 1: The History of Farmers' Rights: A Guide to Central Documents and Literature*, FNI Report no. 8/2005, Fridtjof Nansen Institute, Lysaker.
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (2015): *Farmers' Seed Systems: The Challenge of Linking Formal and Informal Seed Systems*. Documentation of the Expert Talk, 4th June 2014, Bonn. GIZ.
- FAO (2017): *The Global Consultation on Farmers' Rights 2016. Summary of presentations and discussions. 27–30 September 2016, Bali, Indonesia*. FAO, Rome. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bt110e.pdf>
- Halewood, M. (ed.) (2016) *Farmers' Crop Varieties and Farmers' Rights: Challenges in Taxonomy and Law*, Earthscan for Routledge, Abingdon.

This Innovation Factsheet is the result of the collective work of DIVERSIFOOD partners, coordinated by Regine Andersen (FNI), with the support of Riccardo Bocci (RSR) and Tina Kovács (ÖMKI).