

Farmers Call for Suspension of Seed Treaty *Governments fail to meet minimal Treaty obligations* *UN conference told*

Farmers’ organizations who were invited to attend a United Nations meeting on the Treaty that governs the exchange of crop seeds for research and plant breeding late yesterday told the assembled governments that the Treaty would have to be suspended. Speaking on behalf of 30 farmers’ and other civil society organizations, Ibrahim Coulibaly of ROPPA (regional farmers’ organization of West Africa) said that, *“the Treaty, hosted in Rome by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), must halt the exchange of crop germplasm – the critical material for plant breeding. The suspension should remain in effect until governments meet the minimal obligations of the Treaty including its core financial arrangements,”* the African farmer leader concluded.

The second meeting of the Governing Body of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (*“the Law of the Seed”*) began on Monday and is expected to run through Friday but has been blocked – indeed, almost completely silent – because its 115 member governments have been unable to find the \$4.9 million necessary to keep the lights on in its Secretariat and to maintain fundamental monitoring mechanisms that could ensure equitable sharing of the benefits of the seeds to be exchanged for research. Governments have also failed to commit funding to support in situ (“on-farm”) seed conservation or for capacity building in the global South.

“We are faced with the greatest case of institutional biopiracy ever seen,” said Andrew Mushita of the Community Biodiversity Development and Conservation Network (a network of conservation programs in 21 countries). *“In effect, governments are now enabling multinational seed companies to impose a legally-binding regime that forces the exchange of farmers’ seeds without reciprocal benefits,”* said Mushita who also addressed governments yesterday.

Another civil society representative in the meeting, Wilhelmina Pelegrina from SEARICE, a Philippines-based organization said, *“We also expect the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) to suspend its germplasm exchanges in order to remain compliant with the spirit of the Treaty.”* Eleven institutes of the CGIAR have distributed 100,000 seed samples under the terms of the Treaty so far this year. *“We hope the suspension will be temporary and governments will come to their senses quickly,”* said Pelegrina.

Negotiations for the Treaty began in the mid-1990s because scientific researchers and multinational plant breeders were experiencing a substantial decline in their access to vital breeding material. Scientists and farmers, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, were denying requests from northern breeders because private companies were taking farmers’ varieties, patenting and profiting from them. The decline in seed exchange was threatening world food security and governments decided to act. The Treaty – after seven years of acrimonious negotiations – includes provisions for Farmers’ Rights and is supposed to guarantee an equitable flow of financial benefits to developing countries. Without funding for core administrative services, farmers and developing countries can have no confidence that there is equity in the system.

According to Pat Mooney of ETC Group headquartered in Canada, who also attended the meeting, *“The global seed industry has annual commercial sales of \$23 billion. Beginning in the 1970s multinational pesticide enterprises began buying seed companies.”* “Today, Mooney said, *“the top 10 seed companies have 57% of the commercial seed trade. Last year, a single company’s biotech seeds and traits – Monsanto’s – accounted for 86% of the total worldwide area devoted to genetically modified seeds.”* These multinational gene giants are thought to be the major beneficiaries in the current Treaty dispute.

“It’s not all governments,” said Guy Kastler, Via Campesina/Europe *“the real biopirates at this meeting are France, Germany and Australia. These governments are making it impossible for the international community to fulfill its Treaty obligations. Although their seed industries are major beneficiaries of the Treaty, these three countries haven’t contributed a penny to the Treaty’s operations and they are actively blocking negotiations here.”*

Farmers’ organizations – who are attending the meeting at FAO’s invitation but at their own expense – sat stunned yesterday as governments refused to discuss the proposed program of work for the Treaty. Even the most contentious issues passed by without comment.

Farmers undertake the overwhelming majority of the world’s seed conservation and plant breeding. This was confirmed Tuesday when the representative of UPOV, the Union for the Protection of New Plant Varieties (the Geneva-based intergovernmental body that oversees intellectual property related to plant varieties) reported that breeders had only “protected” 70,000 varieties in recent decades. Farmers breed and adapt more than one million varieties every year.

“If negotiations collapse at FAO,” said Maria Elza Gomez from a Brazilian small farmers’ organization, *“the matter might move to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, whose scientific subcommittee will meet at FAO in Rome in February 2008. Governments and FAO could lose control of the Treaty to a different UN body. This would be a serious mistake: the control over seeds – the first link in the food chain – would be left with a bunch of environmentalists who know nothing about agriculture.”*

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