



USC CANADA
56 SPARKS STREET
SUITE 705
OTTAWA, ONTARIO
K1P 5B1, Canada

TEL: (613) 234-6827
FAX: (613) 234-6842
E-MAIL: info@usc-canada.org
WEB SITE: www.usc-canada.org
Founder: Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova

A Sizeable Step Toward a Real Commitment to Farmers' Rights at the FAO

TUNIS, JUNE 5 2009 – After four days of difficult negotiations among 121 governments at a UN Food and Agricultural Organization Treaty meeting on the use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture held in Tunisia, a Canadian effort to block progress was overturned. At midnight on Thursday, Brazil read an amended resolution on farmers' rights to a tired plenary, shifting the prevailing tension amongst delegates into relief and enthusiasm. Following corridor negotiations, in which Europe, Latin America, and Africa confronted Canada's effort to derail the implementation of Farmers' Rights, governments agreed to:

- Encourage member countries to review all measures affecting farmers' rights and remove any barriers preventing farmers from saving, exchanging, or selling seed.
- Involve farmers fully in national and/or regional workshops on the implementation of farmers' rights and to report back on the implementation of farmers' rights at the next meeting of the seed treaty in about 18 months.

The plenary resolution broke from conventional UN diplomatic practices by calling for the full involvement of farmers' organizations in every aspect of the Treaty.

Angola, Brazil, Ecuador, The Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland deserve special thanks for championing farmers' critical role in the conservation and enhancement of plant genetic resources. Honduran farmer Don Luis Pacheco summarized the importance of the Treaty when he said, "Conserving plant genetic diversity is essential to our ability to adjust agriculture to the new threats of climate change. If we don't get the global system for seed conservation right at this meeting in Tunisia, the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen at the end of this year can't succeed."

Wilhelmina Pelegrina, Executive Director of SEARICE – a civil society organization that has long lobbied for farmers' rights – has tracked the negotiations closely. She says, "Although short on firm commitments and dependent on financing, the resolution is a sizeable step forward in the decades-long struggle to recognize and implement farmers' rights at the FAO."

Critical to this growing commitment to farmers' rights during this third meeting of the Governing Body were the many interventions made by representatives of farmers' organizations, such as the world's largest peasants' organization, la Via Campesina. These spokespersons not only emphasized the central role that small farmers play in the conservation of agricultural biodiversity, but also made concrete proposals about the rights and support these farmers, farm communities, indigenous peoples' organizations, and pastoralists require. Not least among these rights is access to national and international gene bank materials or the right to financial support for on-farm biodiversity conservation.

"We did not get everything we needed at this meeting, but at least we now have the opportunity to begin to review legislation that has been so harmful to farmers' rights in many countries. The Canadian team here played dirty tricks and were repeatedly obstructionist during the whole process," says Pat Mooney, Executive Director of ETC Group. "Thankfully, the multilateral process and pressure from civil society was able to bring them back into line."



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The International Treaty on Plant and Genetic Resource's emphasis on national sovereignty over the conservation of plant genetic resources and farmer's rights is also of concern. National seeds laws can, for example, prevent farmers from saving, exchanging, and selling their seeds. And as Jorge Stanley, a member of a Panamanian indigenous youth organization and spokesperson for the International Planning Committee on food sovereignty told the plenary earlier in the day, "*Consent and benefit sharing* for farmers who are the key custodians of our genetic crop heritage, maintaining thousands of local varieties of plants within their territories, are not respected in patent laws that allow, for example, farmers' varieties to be pirated".

While the farmer and civil society organizations present are encouraged by this development, discussions and decisions to date fall short of the support required to make the Treaty work. The funding objective of US\$116M is the bare minimum to sustain it, and contributions remain voluntary. Civil society is determined to monitor developments closely and will return to their national homelands with plans to promote the implementation of farmers' rights. "We will be back," said Brazilian farmer Soniamara Maranhão, of La Via Campesina.

For more information, contact Faris Ahmed in Ottawa 1-800-565-6872 x223 or by email at FAhmed@usc-canada.org.