

Asia-Pacific Farmers' Declaration

On Traditional and Indigenous Food Crops

May 28, 2021

We, the participating organizations in the survey conducted between March - May 2021 on Traditional and Indigenous Crops, as a preparatory process to the Regional Consultation on Forgotten Foods organized by the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), Global Forum of Agricultural Research (GFAR), Alliance Bioversity - CIAT, Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Barli Development Institute for Rural Women (BDIRW) and International Crop Research Institute for Semi-arid Tropics (ICRISAT), appreciate the attention given to traditional and indigenous food crops that we, with our ancestors, have cultivated for generations. We know that many of these crops are nutritious and can readily provide for our families' need for food, fiber, health, medicines and occasionally incomes. We also use our indigenous crops for religious activities and for traditional and local festivals. We understand well that these crops have thrived in our soil, even in marginal areas, with little inputs, and withstanding adverse conditions. Thus, these crops have been conserved by our communities, especially by our women farmers. We have relied on traditional and existing practices – our own knowledge, family's tacit knowledge and fellow farmers' knowledge - to grow, consume and sell these crops. We have been developing resource management approaches that help conserve agrobiodiversity and ways to process and market these crops. Our work on local indigenous crops is a testimony to the role of family farmers as custodians of our country's agrobiodiversity and caretakers of the environment. Our communities are rich repositories of diverse species, wisdom and knowledge.

We have learned that many of these local and indigenous crops are now being termed by international scientists as "forgotten food crops" or "neglected and underutilized species", because these crops have received little attention or entirely ignored by agricultural researchers, plant breeders and policy makers. We recognize that attention to these crops is mounting because of its potential to contribute to fight poverty, hunger and malnutrition, as well as to make agriculture more resilient to withstand the effects of climate change. In our communities, where many are poor, hungry and malnourished, the massive promotion of these crops can mean more available, affordable, adequate nutritious food, and markets for our crops, thereby increasing our incomes.

With the support mainly from our partner civil society organizations and development agencies, some of us have already taken initiatives for conserving, using and diversifying agriculture through indigenous, traditional or local crops:

- In the Pacific, the Pacific Breadfruit and Seeds Program, as prioritized by the Pacific Island Farmers Organisation Network, developed breadfruit, an important indigenous food source, as an orchard crop across the Pacific region. The seeds component encourages members to grow local, nutrient-rich, open pollinated plant varieties and relearn the practice of saving their own seeds for future planting. A virtual community has been established (www.breadfruitpeople.com) where queries on this traditional crop are answered here.
- Affiliated Farmers' Organizations of the Lanka Farmers' Forum (LFF) and Ecological Agricultural Producers' and Entrepreneurs Cooperative Society (EcoAPECoop) are working with small holder food producer organizations and their members in nine districts of Sri Lanka. LFF members are practicing agroecology, which enhances agro biodiversity, protects the environment and uses traditional seed varieties, which tolerate pests, diseases and climate change effects. Further, LFF farmers are adding value to their crop by converting them in to food commodities to earn better income. For example, the Matale District Lanka Farmers Forum produces grain-based food products using different underutilized grain varieties under the brand name Pink Products. Now, the EcoAPECoop, the national level primary cooperative society markets these value-added farmers' products under "ApeCoop" brand. In addition, LFF farmers' together with other farmers groups lobby for national and regional level policy changes to enable and protect the farmers rights to grow, conserve and market indigenous and traditional crop and seed varieties. In 2013, these farmers succeeded in defeating the proposed Seed Act amendments that could have criminalized farmers who grow, conserve and sell traditional food crops and seeds without register.
- The Self Employed Womens' Association (SEWA) in India has established a rural distribution network called RUDI, which buys local crops such as pulses, turmeric, spices, from their farmer members, and then process and package these in their RUDI centers, subsequently it is distributed to rural women through women members called RUDIbens or to feeding centers for children.

However, we realize that there are still challenges in promoting these crops to the larger market, especially in urban communities. These crops are perceived to have low economic value, inferior, and a poor peoples' food. Cultivation of these crops remains low, as there are few researches and innovations done for its wider

cultivation. We have not received support in marketing these crops and good quality seeds are also not readily available. Governments resources and support are mostly channeled towards the cultivation of a few crops including narrow range of staples. And due to such bleak scenario, the number of farmers amongst us who are cultivating these crops are steadily declining, and we are afraid that the knowledge and practices on the cultivation of these indigenous crops will be lost, and along with it, the potential of these crops to contribute to the achievement of the ambitions of Agenda 2030.

But we would like to impress upon the authorities to support the revival and encouragement of such crops for the overall good of the ecology, biodiversity, food, nutritional and income security in the face of increased climate variation, biodiversity loss and compromised nutrition.

As organizations and cooperatives of family farmers and civil society in the Asia-Pacific region, we articulate our commitment to help in the massive promotion of indigenous, traditional, and local crops. We will conduct awareness raising among our members to increase their motivation to cultivate indigenous crops, strengthen the capacities of our women members and encourage our youth members to get fully involved in the full value chain of indigenous crops, including seed production, and advocate for good policies and programs. Where these exist, we will facilitate partnerships with government, research institutions, CSOs and development partners to improve sustainable production, processing and marketing of indigenous food crops. We will conduct learning exchanges and knowledge management workshops, documenting our experiences and capturing lessons learned from these experiences.

However, we will need the support of the government in terms of policies and incentives, of research institutions in terms of participatory research and innovation, of CSOs in terms of capacity building and technical assistance, and development partners in terms of financing.

Thus, we call on our governments to:

- Secure our rights and control over natural resources, especially lands, waters, forests as we need these resources to invest long term in diversifying our farms, that includes the production of indigenous crops.
- Protect the biocultural diversity heritage which is important for the protection of such crops. The climate resilience of these food crops offers great climate adaptation strategies, which many fail to notice.

- Recognize our effort to conserve the forgotten crops and traditional practices that was passed on from ancestor till date using personal resources for the public. Our knowledge should well documented and legally safeguarded. Special attention be extended to family farmers and incentivizing forgotten, neglected and underutilized species. Farmers cooperatives or collectives should be viewed not only as economic entities but also as consumer groups.
- Develop and implement support programs and projects such as:
 - o Provision of farm-to-market roads and electricity to areas devoted to traditional, local crops. And other agricultural infrastructure investment through government schemes with importance to traditional or forgotten crops.
 - o Mechanisms to resolve human and animal conflicts - protection against animals like wild boar / birds / elephants etc.
 - o Recognition, awarding and accreditation of farmer cooperatives or collectives involved in seed conservation and seed production specifically traditional paddy varieties.
 - o Incentives for production and processing activities of family farmers through their organizations and cooperatives, such as grants for seed conservation/seed banking, capital and loans for production, processing (to increase shelf life), and marketing (for buying logistics supplies and equipment) of local crops. Support subvention in value chains, collectivization and certification locally.
- Adequately finance public research institutions for innovations on production, processing, marketing, cooking/consumption of these crops.
- Create markets for traditional local crops such as public procurement for school feeding programs or food assistance and market fairs. The inclusion of traditional foods in public food systems will provide region specific opportunities and demand for traditional crops. It will also diversify farmers' livelihood opportunities.
- Regulate markets, trade and prices and minimum support price in a way that local crops will still be affordable, available, adequate for local communities and the domestic market.
- Awareness programs for wider public on virtues of traditional crops specially highlighting nutritional aspects. Governments through its agriculture agencies or agriculture universities can publish statements in support for traditional paddy varieties to help farmers to access general markets.

We call on research institution to:

- Collaborate with us and our organizations in developing solutions to address challenges related to the quality seed production, cultivation, processing and marketing, packaging of the traditional varieties and selected underutilized crop species (root and tuber crops, leafy but nutritious vegetables) to entice consumers and increase their market value. New methods and technology on all aspects to be researched on forgotten crops. Moreover, it is important to develop technologies that are appropriate and women-friendly. One example is small machineries for processing small grains like millets and indigenous crops. Processing machineries for millets can save lot of women's time and lessen the drudgery. Community-based storage facilities at village level are also much needed.
- Support the conservation and improvement of indigenous, local crop varieties and ensure that good quality seeds are made available and accessible to farmers. Geo tagging to be made for traditional varieties based on local farmers experience and research work by NGOs and researchers. Seed storage structures and in situ conservation demonstration fields to be developed in the farmers' fields to access the performance of local varieties and documentation of characteristics to be done.
- Assist seed enterprises of farmers' organizations so they can multiply quality seeds and planting materials of indigenous crops.
- Conduct your experiments, research, and innovation in a participatory manner, with the equal participation of family farmers through their organizations in the research agenda, design and formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the research, using in-situ approaches as much as possible.
- Translate research outputs on traditional crops (nutritional content) to stimulate demand from consumers and the wider public and in turn support the marketing of our products. Culinary diversity to be studied in detail, there are important aspects like traditional vessels and heat quotient used in traditional cooking which contributes immensely to the final taste of cooked foods.
- Include representatives of family farmer organizations and /or cooperatives in the governance structures of research programs.

We call on partner CSOs to:

- Support the establishment of community seed bank that is critical to address challenges related to access and availability as well as sustainability issues.
- Massively conduct campaigns and public awareness programs to promote the consumption of indigenous, local crops for health of the people and the planet.
- Strengthen capacities of family farmers organizations to provide services to their members in the area of production, processing and marketing of traditional, local food crops.

- Launch and support awareness program on forgotten food for nutrition security through various media, festivals, educational workshops, highlighting forgotten food varieties and "telling stories of forgotten foods". Local schools, nurseries, historical societies, parks and botanical gardens that not only grow but also feature the stories of these forgotten foods.
- Advocate for policies and programs that promote traditional food crops.

We call on development partners to:

- Invest in smallholder farmers and their organizations so they can be empowered to govern, manage and sustain their enterprises and services to their members through decentralization, establishment of community-based enterprises around these crops and through partnerships with other food systems actors.
- Support the diversification of farms that are resilient to shocks.
- Support the capacity building and training on value addition and product development around these crops.
- Support the organization of seed fairs, food fairs and exhibits, cooking class, recipe demonstrations, and exchange visits of young food entrepreneurs and young farmers. And support us to cater to niche markets and industries for our ethnic foods such as millets, linseed, Niger, wild edible greens, yams, and medicinal rice.

We call on the private sector, consumers and the public to:

- Value the work of family farmers by buying directly from farmers or our cooperatives and enterprises.
- Buy the product of the farmers with the price they have set to show appreciation to the product and to the work that they do.
- Support the awareness raising on the nutritional and health benefits of indigenous and traditional food crops.
- Organize consumer action groups to be formed to support and collaborate with NUS farmers

The United Nations has declared 2019-2028 as the UN Decade of Family Farming (UNDIFF). This decade is important as 70% of family farmers are in the Asia-Pacific region, and most of them are small scale family farmers who are poor and don't have enough to eat. The Global Action Plan of the UNDIFF recognizes the multidimensionality of Family Farming, and when effective policies and programs are enacted, family farmers can provide utmost contribution to a bio diverse and resilient agriculture. We believe that with a strong, cohesive multi stakeholder partnership with family farmers at the heart and at the center of bio diverse agriculture through promotion of traditional local crops, we can effectively implement the Global Action

Plan of the UNDF, thereby contributing towards the achievement of the SDGs, particularly SDG1 and 2.