International Workshop: The use of agrobiodiversity by indigenous peoples and rural communities in adapting to climate change

17-20 June, 2009, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Background Notes

The Platform for Agrobiodiversity Research

The Platform for Agrobiodiversity Research (the Platform) brings together researchers, civil society, international organizations and others to share knowledge and experiences that can improve the maintenance and use of all aspects of agrobiodiversity. The Platform's guiding principles include a concern with research of potential global significance; a focus on work that complements existing research efforts and addresses more than one component or level of agrobiodiversity; a commitment to working with poor farmers, local communities and indigenous peoples on agendas of relevance to their needs. It aims to work in ways that link custodians, managers and beneficiaries of biodiversity. Currently hosted by Bioversity International, the Platform's objectives are:

- To collate and synthesize agrobiodiversity data and information and disseminate knowledge, making available relevant tools and practices that support improved use of agrobiodiversity and identifying areas where collaborative knowledge generation is needed.
- To identify ways in which the use of agrobiodiversity can contribute to addressing major global challenges, to make relevant information easily available and to provide options on the contribution of agrobiodiversity in these areas.
- To identify and facilitate relevant new and innovative research partnerships that strengthen cross-cutting, multidisciplinary and participatory research and to contribute to agrobiodiversity research capacity building in developing regions.

Agrobiodiversity and climate change

Agrobiodiversity includes all the components of biological diversity of relevance to food and agriculture as well as the variety and variability of animals, plants and micro-organisms, at the genetic, species and ecosystem levels that sustain the functions, structure and processes of the agro-ecosystem. Maintained by farmers, communities and indigenous peoples, the nature and character of agrobiodiversity in agro-ecosystems reflects the interactions between people, their environment and their available biological diversity. The continued use and adaptive management of agrobiodiversity is central to sustainable production to improving the livelihoods, food security, and health of poor farmers throughout the world. At the global level, humanity depends upon the adaptability of agriculture to cope with challenges such as climate change and to meet basic needs.

Significant agrobiodiversity has already been lost from many production systems leaving them impoverished, vulnerable, dependent on external inputs and increasingly unsustainable. However, much of the world’s agrobiodiversity is still being used by indigenous and traditional agricultural communities that depend on agrobiodiversity for their livelihoods. In this role they act as custodians of a diversity of crops, forages, livestock, agroforestry products, and fish, and the other plant, animal and microbial species found in and around their production areas that are managed and maintained to provide food, fuel, medicine and many other products necessary to their wellbeing.
Climate change is one of many forces that are compelling rural communities and indigenous peoples to adapt and change. Many communities are having to cope with specific trends such as increased temperature or decreased rainfall under increasingly variable, unpredictable and fluctuating production conditions. Traditional knowledge and materials built up over generations of observation, experimentation and adaptation are often inadequate in the face of changing circumstances.

The global processes that drive climate change may often be best met with local level responses that are embedded in local cultures and based on agrobiodiversity. Agrobiodiversity not only provides a ‘portfolio effect’ to buffer risks, it provides landscape, species, and genetic diversity necessary for adaptability and resilience in the face of fluctuating and variable environments. The practices and experiences being developed by indigenous peoples and traditional agrarian communities in marginal areas constitute an important element in the strategies to cope with and adapt to climate change. Because they are often embedded in local cultures of marginalized communities this experience and knowledge is often unrecognized and undervalued. The emphasis of climate change policies tends to be on macro-level global strategies which, although vital, neglect the very real practical actions being undertaken or needed by poor rural communities and by indigenous peoples seeking to maintain their culture, traditions and production base. It is becoming increasingly evident that successful global strategies for biodiversity conservation rely on local leadership and major investment in local capacity.

The workshop and its objectives

Over the last year the Platform, with the support of The Christensen Fund, has undertaken a project aimed improving our understanding of the central role that agrobiodiversity plays in coping with climate change. The work has the following objectives:

1. To bring together and make available information on the use of agrobiodiversity by rural and indigenous communities to cope with climate change, and relevant research work on effect of climate change on agriculture and agrobiodiversity
2. To support enhanced communication among agrobiodiversity researchers, maintainers and users
3. To prepare a synthesis and assessment on the maintenance and use of agrobiodiversity by indigenous peoples and rural communities under conditions of climate change
4. To identify new cross-cutting multidisciplinary research activities

The planned workshop is a key part of achieving these objectives. In particular it is expected that the workshop will:

- Bring together indigenous community representatives, civil society and researchers and support the increasing dialogue between these different groups
- Review available information and a draft discussion document prepared by the Platform to help develop a synthesis document summarizing the state of knowledge assessing needs and options for further work and identifying knowledge gaps.
- Set out key research issues and outline possible collaborative approaches and areas of work for future projects, developing where possible outline project proposals.
Working methods and approaches

The workshop preparations and programme will seek to provide opportunities for:
- Sharing information
- Discussing key issues
- Identifying knowledge gaps and research needs
- Developing or suggesting new ideas, ways of working and new activities or project concepts
- Developing new partnerships

We have invited approx. 25 people to the Workshop and have set aside 3 days for discussion, with a final day (20 June) for a field trip kindly organized by our co-hosts the University of Chiang Mai Plant Genetic Resources and Nutrition Laboratory (CMUPNlab). Participants come from indigenous groups, civil society organizations, research institutes and international organizations. They have a common interest in the maintenance and use of agrobiodiversity and the impact of climate change.

Prior to the workshop (over the next 3 weeks) the Platform Secretariat will distribute relevant documents on climate change and agrobiodiversity. We invite all participants to let us have any information and documents that you feel would help our work together with any notes on key issues which should be discussed. We will share these with all participants. The Platform Secretariat will also circulate a discussion document which seeks, in a preliminary way, to bring together the information we have obtained over the last year and to outline some gaps in our knowledge and some questions or issues that we think might need to be discussed.

The first day of the workshop will be concerned primarily with sharing information, with making sure that we have identified and agreed on the issues that should be discussed, and working out how we can best achieve our agreed objectives.

During the second and third day we expect to be working in smaller groups on particular topics or issues identified in our preliminary discussions coming to plenary discussions whenever appropriate. We will hope to develop clear conclusions which will guide the Platform in the work it should undertake in this area in the future and provide material to share with other groups around the world as well as key meetings such as the 15th Conference of the Parties of UNFCCC.