

Project presentation

Who controls the seeds?

In many developing countries the right of farmers to use and exchange farm-saved seed is a form of life insurance. Ensuring that farmers have this right is an important means for poverty alleviation and crucial to maintaining crop genetic diversity throughout the world.

Two thirds of the 1.2 billion poorest people in the world live in rural areas and are dependent on traditional agriculture. They do not have the financial means to buy commercially available seed or the input factors needed to cultivate them. However, they often have long experience with, and a profound understanding of, local plant diversity within crops such as grains, potatoes, vegetables and fruit. By cultivating and developing these crops they are contributing to the preservation and development of global plant genetic diversity, which constitutes the basis for the world's food production.

Regine Andersen of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute heads a project that analyses what it takes to ensure that the rights of farmers related to crop genetic diversity are implemented. Issues relating to biodiversity and poverty reduction comprise key components of the project.

Studying those who succeed

“Unfortunately regulatory mechanisms often complicate the realisation of the farmers’ rights to the seeds they use,” explains Dr Andersen.

Farmers’ rights are addressed in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, also known as the Plant Treaty, adopted under the auspices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.



Regine Andersen.
(Photo: Karin Totland)

“Our project has been studying successful examples that show what farmers’ rights can mean in practice. In addition we are seeking to understand what NGOs and other relevant actors can do to ensure that these rights are realised, based on these examples” she says.



“Farmers’ rights are key to global food security,” says Regine Andersen.
Photo: Development Fund, Norway

Regulations restrict rights

Dr Andersen explains that existing regulations affecting the management of crop genetic diversity increasingly favour the seed industry with the aim of creating new and higher yielding crop varieties.

“There are patent rights and plant breeders’ rights to compensate plant breeders for their efforts and create incentives for innovation in the field of plant breeding, but in many countries these rights make it more difficult for farmers to conserve crop genetic diversity and use it in a sustainable manner,” says Andersen.

In a number of countries these rules limit the farmers’ legal space to exchange and sell seed among themselves. More and more countries are adopting rules of this type, often as a result of bilateral and regional trade agreements with countries and regions in the North. While traditional practices are still in place in rural communities in most developing countries, even where they have become illegal, it is only a matter of time before governments begin to enforce these rules more strictly.



▶▶▶ “There are also regulations relating to the approval of plant types and seed quality. These are designed to safeguard plant health and seed quality in agriculture, but at the same time they prevent farmers in countries where they are in force from exchanging or selling the great diversity of plant varieties not covered by the regulations.”

Rights lead to increased earnings

“Ensuring farmers’ rights enhances the ability of poor farmers to support themselves. We are looking at how certain local communities have managed to deal with these challenges, and are trying to identify the factors that were crucial to their success,” says Dr Andersen.

The researchers have visited local communities in Nepal, the Philippines and Peru and have via partners also gathered information in Ethiopia, Syria, Zimbabwe and Mali.

“One of the success stories comes from villages in Nepal, where the population has found new ways of developing and making use of the diversity of traditional crop varieties, enabling the farmers to increase their income and improve their livelihoods,” Andersen states.

She is currently working on a book that will present the various success stories.

The current research project incorporates studies in a number of countries and identification of best practices and has been underway since 2007. The project has been granted funding under the Norway – A Global Partner (NORGLOBAL) programme at the Research Council of Norway.

The world needs diversity

Protecting and promoting farmers’ rights is not only crucial to reducing poverty, but also to maintaining the genetic diversity of agricultural plants and thereby ensuring food security throughout the world.

“Farmers need to exchange seeds among themselves to preserve and develop biodiversity,” Andersen asserts. “Gene banks are not enough. The different plant species must be cultivated and continue to live so as not to lose their intrinsic properties. It is also important not to lose the knowledge relating to different plant varieties and their cultivation and use.”

Dr Andersen considers it critical to develop the legal system in such a way that the farmers are rewarded for their contribution to preserving crop diversity, as is set out in the Plant Treaty.

“Crop diversity forms the basis of global food security and for all food production throughout the world. Farmers’ rights are essential both for the preservation and sustainable use of global crop diversity,” Dr Andersen stresses.



Photo: Development Fund, Norway

Photo: Regine Andersen

Working to change the rules

The researchers’ conviction that seed regulations need to be made less stringent to ensure farmers’ rights recently received support in Norway.

“As of 30 April this year Norwegian farmers may exchange and sell seeds from heritage varieties of crops, if it is not done commercially,” says Dr Andersen. “Elsewhere in Europe this is not permitted, and only crop varieties approved in line with the regulations can be sold from seed shops.”

As Dr Andersen explains, none of the Norwegian stakeholders is seeking stringent restrictions in this area, but Norway is obliged to adhere to EU regulations, as this is an area that is encompassed by the EEA Agreement.

The researchers are also working to ensure that the results of their research form the basis for the designation of policy at all levels. As part of this effort the results of the projects were included in a report on the right to food that was presented by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food at the United Nations General Assembly in autumn 2009.

Regine Andersen is currently organising a three-day conference on farmers’ rights in Addis Ababa in November, which will gather together players and interest groups from all over the world. The results will be presented to the Fourth Session of the Governing Body of the Plant Treaty as a basis for further efforts for the realisation of farmers’ rights. Dr Andersen was asked by the Secretariat of the Treaty to organise the conference in light of her work on farmers’ rights.

The NORGLOBAL-program

NORGLOBAL shall strengthen Norwegian research on and with the South. It includes Povpeace, Cgiar, Women- and gender research, Globalisation of the environment-, energy- and Climate research, Econpop, Western Balkan and The networks. New research related to development might be placed under NORGLOBAL

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