



*International Planning Committee (IPC) for Food Sovereignty*  
*Working Group on Agricultural Biodiversity*



From:

*Secretariat of the*  
*International Planning Committee (IPC) for Food Sovereignty*  
On behalf of the below signatories' organizations

To:

***Mr R. C. AGRAWAL and Ms Svanhild Isabelle BATTA TORHEIM***  
Co-Chairs of the ITPGRFA AHTEG on Farmers' Rights;

***Ms Yasmina EL BAHLOUL***  
Chairperson of ITPGRFA Bureau;

***Mr Kent NNADOZIE***  
Secretary of the ITPGRFA;

All members of the ITPGRFA AHTEG on Farmers' Rights.

**Re: Virtual Meeting of the Ad-Hoc Technical Expert Group on Farmers' Rights (AHTEG-FR) on 25-28 August 2020**

Through this letter, we, farmer representatives in the ad-hoc technical expert group on farmers' rights (AHTEG-FR), would like to express our concerns regarding the virtual AHTEG-FR meeting, scheduled for 25-28 August 2020.

As we write this letter, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread around the world, profoundly affecting all aspects of our lives. This pandemic and the measures that governments have taken to address it have had devastating impacts on peasants, indigenous peoples, agricultural workers and other rural people and communities. The livelihoods of small-scale food producers have been adversely affected and in many cases our rights have been violated. The pandemic has thus further exacerbated structural discrimination, marginalization and widespread violations of our rights.

At the same time, peasant farming and local food systems have proven their resilience in the context of a huge and profound crisis like the one caused by COVID-19. Around the world, small-scale food producers and their local distribution networks have provided food to the population, thus preventing an even deeper food and hunger crisis. This has been possible despite the fact that state authorities' responses to the crisis have mostly focused on maintaining global supply chains and mass retailing, thus supporting a system that has massively contributed to making the crisis in the first place. Localized and sustainable peasant food systems that are based on agroecological and biodiverse production systems, traditional knowledge and innovations, as well as territorial markets are the response to the current crisis. These depend on the full respect, protection and fulfilment of the rights of peasants, Indigenous Peoples and other rural people, including our rights to seeds and biodiversity.

Unfortunately, the current crisis has shown that international governance institutions and instruments have not been able to ensure the protection of the rights of rural people and Peoples. Governments have opted for national measures and there has been a lack of international coordination and policy coherence. This illustrates once more that there is a lack of effective implementation of internationally recognized rights at national and regional levels. Farmers' rights to seeds, as enshrined in the ITPGRFA, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) are one example. We would like to remind you that peasants' and Indigenous Peoples' organizations have advocated for many years for an effective implementation of their rights. The establishment of the AHTEG-FR by GB7 has been the result of this work and recognizes that small scale and family farmers' rights are at the heart of the ITPGRFA. Through the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) we have expressed our concerns about the previous AHTEG-FR meetings and the slow progress. We welcome the fact that GB8 has decided to add additional seats for farmer experts in the AHTEG-FR. We remain committed to this important work and believe that guidance on the effective implementation of farmers' rights, with a particular focus on small scale, family and Indigenous farmers, is now needed more than ever. This would also contribute to restoring trust of communities and Peoples in the multilateral system of the UN.

Despite our commitment to the AHTEG-FR and the mandate that has been given to us by our organizations, we must share some serious concerns about the virtual modality of the upcoming meeting in August. We understand that the Treaty has decided to move forward with its work despite the limitations in participation imposed by the pandemic. We believe, however, that it is critical to take into account that virtual meetings entail serious risks, in particular for the effective participation of small-scale farmers and Indigenous Peoples, i.e. the rights holders of the ITPGRFA.

In many regions of the world, rural people and Indigenous Peoples do not have access to the internet or have to travel outside their homes and communities to obtain such access. These difficulties are further increased in the current pandemic as such travel expose already-vulnerable individuals, families and communities to an increased infection risk while confinement measures establish restrictions on the free movement in many countries. In addition, in many places, in particular in rural areas, internet connection is not stable or sufficient, so it may be possible to send or receive emails, but not to follow a meeting for an extended period of time. This limits not only participation in the meeting itself, but also concerns prior preparation between us as farmer representatives and the organizations that we represent. Different time zones and language issues may further hamper the effective participation of us experts. We would also like to emphasize that many of us are not used to virtual meetings and digital tools. For academics and government officials, these may be a common practice, for us peasants they are not – our main work is on our fields and in our communities, with real people, plants and animals.

We would also like to stress that many organizations representing small scale, family and Indigenous farmers operate in contexts of oppression, under the watchful eye of states and other actors. These conditions may entail digital risks that can compromise the security of information, communication, and consequently, of the experts and their organizations.

All these aspects entail serious risks for the effective, equitable and meaningful participation of small scale and Indigenous farming experts, as well as other experts who may face similar situations, in the third AHTEG-FR meeting. We therefore urge you to take the necessary measures to address these risks. It is very important to clarify which are the rules of procedure of the virtual AHTEG-FR meeting, including the status of any decisions and agreements that may be made. We would like to highlight some aspects that need to be taken into account for the upcoming meeting:

- Choice of time for meetings: Members of the AHTEG will be in different time zones, so it will be important to convene meetings at times that ensure the effective participation of all experts from different regions of the world.
- Rules of procedure: The rules that will govern the meeting need to be clarified in a transparent and timely manner, and need to be communicated to all members of the AHTEG-FR and other participants within a reasonable period of time, clarifying inter alia:
  - If and how people need to register in order to participate;
  - Clearly establish and communicate the start and end times of the meetings as well as times for breaks, taking into account different time zones;
  - What data protection measures and privacy policy are put in place, depending on the digital platform that is used;
  - How people will be identified on the digital platform;
  - If the meeting will be recorded and if the recording will be made available, specifying how and if interpretations of the eventually recorded meetings will be provided;
  - How experts can request the floor and how the order of speakers will be determined;
  - If there are any time limitations for statements made by experts;
  - Whether comments or questions that are made in the chat will be taken into account and documented as part of the deliberations;
  - Indicate sufficiently in advance the technical requirements needed to participate in the virtual meeting including clarification regarding the availability of interpretation services for those joining by telephone.
- Interpretation: Ensure simultaneous interpretation in all UN languages and explain in detail the instructions for participating in the meeting in the different languages. The chairing of the meeting should further take into account that interpretation causes delays and ensure that the pace of the meeting ensures equal treatment of all participants.
- Translation: All meeting documents, including information documents and any documents that may be produced during the meeting need to be translated into all UN Languages: On-line communication already makes it more difficult to understand all interventions and it is therefore essential that all documents (including drafts) that will be discussed are translated and made available sufficiently in advance.
- Equal participation of all experts: Taking into account the virtual modality of the meeting and the reduced time, it needs to be ensured that all experts have the possibility to express their views on all matters that will be discussed during the meeting, taking into account any limitations or difficulties that they may experience regarding the participation in a virtual meeting. We would like to emphasize that we, as farmer representatives in the AHTEG-FR, represent the rights holders of the Treaty whose voices need to be taken into account.
- Written contributions: Due to possible difficulties to participate in the meeting and the reduced time, it should be possible for participants to send contributions in written form, without limiting their contributions to what is shared during the time of the online session. These written contributions

should be taken into account during the discussions and for the elaboration of the meeting report. It should be thus clearly indicate how written contributions can be sent, specifying the time frame, if any, beyond which it will not be possible to send written contributions, e-mail addresses and any other information relevant to ensure the receipt of written contributions by the Experts, also clarifying how they will be disseminated to the Experts Group.

- Facilitating access to the internet: In order to ensure equitable participation, in particular the effective participation of the groups most affected by the digital divide, the Treaty secretariat should consider the possibility to provide technical and financial support to all those experts who may have difficulties in participating in the virtual meeting. The nature of such support as well as the modalities for requesting it should be communicated to all experts in different languages in a transparent and timely manner.
- Data protection and privacy: It is essential that existing guarantees be implemented and communicated transparently to ensure the right to privacy and the protection of participants' data, in compliance with strict human rights standards.

To conclude, we would like to emphasize that we consider that virtual meetings cannot replace face-to-face meetings and should therefore be considered as an exception. While we reiterate our commitment to the work of the AHTEG-FR, we participate in the meeting trusting that the concerns expressed in this letter will be addressed.

*Thanks for your consideration*

*Kind Regards*

*The Secretariat of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty*

## **Signatures**

### *Experts*

Mr. Sergio Alonzo, Asociación de Organizaciones de los Cuchumatanes (ASOCUCH)

David Otieno, Kenyan Peasant League (KPL)

Mr. Ali Razmakhah, Centre for Sustainable Development and Environment (CENESTA)

Tanmay Joshi, Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS)

Alimata Traore, Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes (CNOP-Mali)

### *Observers (Organizations)*

The organizations members of the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC)  
Working Group on Agricultural Biodiversity

- International Indian Treaty Council (IITC)

- La Via Campesina (LVC)
- Movimiento Agroecológico de América Latina y el Caribe (MAELA)
- Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA)

African Centre for Biodiversity (ACBIO)

Third World Network (TWN)

FIAN International

Centro Internazionale Crocevia (CIC)

Southeast Asia Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE)