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INOFO POSITION PAPER

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Strengthening Seed Sovereignty for Organic Farmers Globally

Seeds are the foundation of agricultural systems worldwide, determining the success of crops and, consequently, the food security and livelihoods of billions of people. For organic farmers, seeds hold an even deeper significance. They are not merely agricultural inputs but also repositories of biodiversity, cultural heritage, and local knowledge. Seed sovereignty the right to save, exchange, and plant one's own seeds ensures that farmers can continue practicing organic agriculture in a manner that is sustainable, ecologically sound, and self-reliant.

However, the global seed industry has undergone massive consolidation in recent decades, with multinational corporations gaining unprecedented control over seed production and distribution. This shift has favored hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds, which are often patented, preventing farmers from saving and replanting seeds in subsequent seasons. These seeds are also typically bred for high-input farming systems, relying on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, which are incompatible with organic farming principles. Many seed sovereignty efforts stem from community-led initiatives thus emphasizing the crucial role of grassroots seed-saving networks in preserving seed diversity.

This paper presents the position of the Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmers organizations' (INOFO) on the importance of promoting seed sovereignty globally. INOFO advocates for organic farmers' unrestricted access to diverse, locally adapted seeds that support sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and resilience to climate change.

Background and Global Context

The global seed market has seen dramatic consolidation, with just a few multinational corporations controlling over 60% of the commercial seed market. The development and promotion of hybrid and GM seeds have resulted in the loss of traditional seed varieties. These commercial seeds are often unsuited to the needs of smallholder organic farmers, particularly in regions that depend on biodiversity for food security and ecosystem health. Multinational corporations' control over seeds not only undermines biodiversity but also leads to increased seed prices and a loss of regional seed knowledge.

For millennia, farmers around the world have been the custodians of seed diversity, selecting and saving seeds to enhance traits like pest resistance, drought tolerance, and flavor. These traditional seed systems have ensured that agricultural biodiversity remains robust and that farmers have access to varieties suited to their specific ecological and cultural contexts.

However, the rise of industrial agriculture has disrupted these systems. Hybrid seeds, for example, cannot be saved for future planting as they lose their vigor

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after one generation. GM seeds are often subject to intellectual property laws that prevent farmers from replanting them. This has made farmers increasingly dependent on commercial seed companies, undermining their ability to maintain control over their agricultural practices.

Additionally, seed sovereignty is shaped by national and regional seed policies and regulations. Some laws support farmers' rights to save and exchange seeds, while others impose restrictions through patent systems and seed certification standards. These regulations often prioritize commercial seed standards, pushing traditional seed varieties to the margins

Position Statement

The Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmers Organisations (INOFO) firmly advocates for the protection and promotion of seed sovereignty globally. INOFO opposes the corporate concentration of seed markets and the increasing reliance on hybrid and genetically modified seeds that threaten organic farming principles. The organization calls for a global movement to preserve traditional seed systems, promote biodiversity, and empower farmers to maintain control over their seeds.

Supporting Arguments

1. Biodiversity and Agroecological Sustainability

Biodiversity is at the heart of resilient agricultural systems, and organic farming relies heavily on the diverse varieties of plants that have been cultivated and adapted to local environments over centuries. Open-pollinated and heirloom seed varieties, which are naturally suited to the specific ecological conditions of a region, provide essential traits for organic farmers such as natural pest resistance, drought tolerance, and enhanced nutrition.

A 2019 report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) emphasized that agricultural biodiversity is crucial for ensuring global food security. It noted that biodiversity helps stabilize ecosystems, improve soil health, and support crop resilience in the face of climate variability. Unfortunately, the widespread adoption of uniform, commercial seed varieties has eroded this diversity. For instance, according to the FAO, more than 90% of crop varieties grown at the start of the 20th century have disappeared, replaced by high-yielding, uniform hybrids.

By promoting local seed systems, INOFO aims to conserve and enhance the agricultural biodiversity that is critical for organic farmers. Community seed banks, farmer-led breeding programs, and international seed exchanges are essential tools for safeguarding this diversity. These initiatives ensure that farmers have access to the broad range of genetic material needed to adapt to evolving environmental conditions and market demands.

Case Study: In India, Navdanya, a movement led by environmental activist Dr. Vandana Shiva, has established over 150 community seed banks to preserve local varieties of rice, wheat, and millet. These seed banks have helped organic farmers withstand the pressures of industrial agriculture and climate change by providing them with access to diverse, locally adapted seed varieties.

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2. Farmers' Rights and Empowerment

The concept of seed sovereignty is closely linked to the rights of farmers to save, exchange, and reproduce seeds freely. These rights have been undermined by the expansion of intellectual property regimes that favor corporate control over genetic resources. Patent laws, plant variety protection (PVP) systems, and international trade agreements like the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) have placed significant restrictions on farmers' traditional practices of seed saving and sharing.

INOFO believes that protecting farmers' rights is essential for maintaining the autonomy and independence of organic farming communities. The commodification of seeds through intellectual property rights has marginalized smallholder farmers, particularly in the Global South, where seed saving is a vital practice for ensuring food security. By opposing the privatization of seeds, INOFO advocates for legal frameworks that uphold farmers' rights to maintain control over their agricultural resources.

Case Study: In the Andean region of South America, farmers have long practiced seed exchange through informal networks known as "seed fairs." These fairs allow farmers to share seeds adapted to local conditions, enhancing biodiversity and community resilience. However, new intellectual property laws threaten these traditional practices by making it illegal for farmers to exchange patented seeds.

3. Resilience to Climate Change

Climate change poses a significant threat to global agriculture, with rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and more frequent extreme weather events disrupting crop production. Organic farmers, particularly those in vulnerable regions, need access to seeds that are resilient to these changing conditions. Traditional seed systems, which have developed over generations, are better suited to meet these challenges than commercial, uniform seed varieties.

Local seed varieties, which have been naturally selected for their adaptability to local climates, provide organic farmers with the tools they need to mitigate the impacts of climate change. These seeds have evolved to withstand droughts, floods, and temperature fluctuations, making them an essential resource for building climate resilience in agriculture.

INOFO calls for increased investment in research and development focused on breeding climate-resilient seed varieties. This includes supporting farmer-led seed breeding programs and expanding regional seed banks that facilitate the exchange of seeds between countries and regions. There is need for recognizing and integrating traditional seed-saving knowledge into formal research on climate-resilient seeds. This knowledge is critical but often undervalued in conventional breeding programs. By prioritizing seed sovereignty, INOFO seeks to empower organic farmers to adapt to the challenges of climate change.

Case Study: In East Africa, Seed Savers Network (SSN) has been instrumental in preserving and promoting local seed diversity by establishing community

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seed banks and conducting seed-saving training sessions. SSN's focus is on enhancing resilience by encouraging farmers to save traditional seeds and promoting biodiversity, particularly among smallholder farmers who face challenges posed by industrial seed systems. Farmers have been trained on participatory plant breeding where they have developed some draught-tolerant maize and sorghum at farmer level.

4. Global Food Security
Seed sovereignty is not just a matter of agricultural sustainability; it is also central to global food security. As the global population continues to grow, the need for resilient, diverse, and sustainable food production systems has become more urgent. Organic farmers, who practice agroecological farming methods that enhance soil health, conserve water, and reduce the use of synthetic inputs, are well-positioned to contribute to global food security.

However, the loss of seed diversity and the concentration of control over seed markets threaten the ability of organic farmers to contribute to food security. By promoting seed sovereignty, INOFO seeks to reverse these trends and ensure that organic farming systems remain resilient, productive, and sustainable.

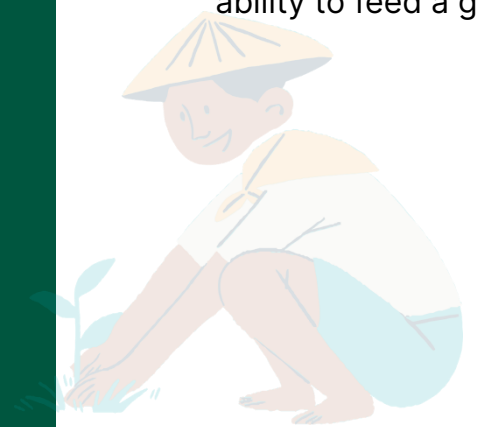
Supporting small-scale, decentralized seed-saving efforts not only promotes biodiversity but also increases resilience to market shocks and ensures that local communities have control over their food systems.

Case Study: In Brazil, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) has established seed banks to preserve native varieties. These seed banks have enabled MST farmers to maintain food sovereignty in the face of increasing corporate control over seeds, contributing to the food security of rural communities.

Conclusion

The Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmers Organizations' (INOFO) is committed to promoting seed sovereignty as a global priority. By protecting farmers' rights to save, exchange, and reproduce seeds, we can safeguard biodiversity, enhance resilience to climate change, and ensure the sustainability of organic farming practices. INOFO calls on governments, international organizations, and the global agricultural community to take immediate action to support seed sovereignty and protect the rights of organic farmers worldwide.

Seed sovereignty is not just an agricultural issue; it is a fundamental human right and a critical component of global efforts to achieve food security and sustainability. Without seed sovereignty, the future of organic farming and the ability to feed a growing global population remains at risk.



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