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# *The Time is Ripe*

*for governments to strengthen  
sustainable and food-secure farming*

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A Call to Action by the Small-Scale Farmers and  
Agrobiodiversity Dialogue to Action Group (DtA)

March 2017

**The world's essential food system is endangered.**

At least 70% of the food we consume is produced by the world's 1.5 billion small-scale farmers. Feeding and truly nourishing humanity in the face of climate change depends on the world's small-scale farmers maintaining and developing agricultural biodiversity. Besides being essential for the resilience and stability of agricultural production systems, agricultural biodiversity is fundamental to the livelihoods, health and nutrition of billions. As a product of human management and ingenuity, the conservation and development of agricultural biodiversity must necessarily involve the participation and support of small-scale farmers at the heart of its management.

**Quantity is not the issue; quality and sustainability are.**

Food scarcity is not the core challenge. The world already produces plenty—roughly a third more food for each of us than in the 1960s. Even after feeding to livestock a third of global grain production, 90 percent of all soy meal, and a third of the fish catch, there is still a global average of roughly 2,800 calories available per person per day. The real issues are: 1) producing culturally desired food with nutritional variety essential for good health; 2) access and distribution—getting food to the people who lack it; and 3) producing without harming planetary health.

**Industrial agriculture harms the planet.**

Industrial agriculture is an intensive, high-input, linear system that tends to focus on increased production without regard to environmental, social or health costs. Small-scale farmers and national food systems are being displaced by industrial agriculture, driven by global corporate priorities. It is the single largest user of water on the planet, using 70% of the available freshwater today. It pollutes land and water; produces 30% of global greenhouse gases and is the biggest cause of biodiversity loss. This is a model of agriculture that needs to be constrained.

**Governments play a critical, unique role in sustainable, national food systems.**

National food security, action on climate change and income security are responsibilities of government that are now intertwined in a historically unprecedented way. Farming is mainly a private activity implemented locally in most parts of the world by small-scale farmers. Yet their innovative activities, including the ongoing development of agricultural biodiversity through their practices, such as agroecology, are in the public interest. Parts of the world are characterized by large scale farming; many are moving towards more environmentally friendly practices. Sustainable large and small-scale farming are affected by global forces and need increased public support. Small-scale farming in particular depends on appropriate government interventions at the national and global level for its structure, support and its development.

**Governments are increasingly constrained in the policy actions they can take.**

Trade liberalization through the World Trade Organization and the proliferation of mega-regional free trade agreements scale back the role of the state in many ways, such as the imposition of limits on the grant of agricultural subsidies in developing country governments, the requirement to dismantle state-owned enterprises and the imposition of minimum standards for intellectual property rights. Governments are constrained by market-centric doctrines focused on profitability and simplistic measures of productivity, which lead to policies that can have devastating effects on systemic resilience, and incentivize farmers to abandon agro-biodiverse farming practices in favour of counter-productive practices, such as mono-cropping and the overuse of chemical fertilizer and herbicides.

**Recognizing** small-scale farmers and agricultural biodiversity are facing serious challenges;

**Understanding** that of the almost one billion people that go hungry, millions are poor small-scale farmers;

**Further understanding** that the rate of agricultural biodiversity loss has increased due in part to the imperatives of multiple global trends;

**Observing** that large-scale land acquisitions have displaced small-scale farmers, eroded biodiversity and trended toward export production of primarily non-food crops;

**Noticing** that governments have been limited by multilateral rules such as trade rules and donor conditions that dictate or limit domestic policy-making;

**Aware** that current policy and donor approaches often marginalize the public sector<sup>1</sup> and the role it must play to support small-scale farmers and agricultural biodiversity;

**Noting** increased calls for public private partnerships in global policy and donor approaches, whereas the efficacy of this approach to align with the public interest is unproven and unclear.

Inclusive systems that support our foremost producers of food must be constructed. We recognize that these fundamental changes to the food system are not simple, but now, more than ever, the time is ripe for change.

### **Believing:**

- The time is ripe to recognize the limits of market-centric approaches to public policy and to construct an approach that works to promote public interest.
- That governments need: capacity to act and be legally able to play their essential role in protecting the public interest, in this case in ensuring food and nutrition security by providing the necessary support to small-scale farmers and agricultural biodiversity; and space to act in the public interest, uninhibited by international policy imperatives and donor constraints.

### **We call upon:**

- The international community to mobilize support for a more proactive role of the public sector in supporting small-scale farmers, their seed systems and the protection of agricultural biodiversity; and
- National governments to engage in consultation with their small-scale farmers to identify what they require in order to effectively engage in activities to support the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and to achieve secure livelihoods.

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1 The term “public sector” is used interchangeably with “the state” and “government.”



The Small-Scale Farmers and Agrobiodiversity Dialogue to Action Group (DtA) includes participants from the following organizations:

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*For more information, visit [quno.org/areas-of-work/food-sustainability](http://quno.org/areas-of-work/food-sustainability) or contact Representative Susan H. Bragdon at [sbragdon@quno.ch](mailto:sbragdon@quno.ch)*

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