


always been that the increased demand for food, especially given the rate at which global population is increasing, will have to be met with less land, less water, less labour, and less pesticide. It is, however, precisely in these conditions that hybrid rice performs worst, as is shown by the experience of almost every country that has tried to grow it. As we've also learned from different country programmes, the subsidies that governments pay, out of taxpayers' money, just to get a hybrid rice programme up and running go more or less straight into the coffers of seed and agrochemicals

companies. Yet governments still want to keep the money flowing for hybrid rice ...

The threat that hybrid rice is posing to farmers' agricultural biodiversity is no longer confined to genetic erosion. Many of the companies involved in this current hybrid rice explosion are also developing GM rice, and are involved in various incidents of contamination. They are taking control of the rapidly changing seed system. This undermines farmers' livelihoods and food sovereignty, and eats at the very core of sustainable farming. 

Wholesale rejection of EC seed directive

GRAIN

Any hope that the European Commission (EC) might establish a legal framework to accommodate traditional farmers, whose very way of life requires the saving and exchanging of seeds, was dashed in April this year. Eight years ago directive 98/95/EC was issued to cover the whole of the seed industry within the European Community. It was recognised at the time that special conditions must be established for so-called "conservation varieties" of seeds, regarded as important for genetic conservation. It is this enabling legislation, spelling out what directive 98/95/EC means in practice, which was finally published in April.

In the event, after years of heavy lobbying by multinational seed companies and some member states, particularly France, this enabling legislation has turned out to be highly restrictive and partial. It permits the saving and exchanging of seeds only in small quantities and within severely restricted geographical areas, and even then only of varieties that have been "historically cultivated and locally adapted". It does not allow saving or exchange of varieties that have been especially adapted for organic farming, or of new varieties bred using traditional practices.

Various traditional farmers' groups and non-governmental organisations, working together in

the European "Liberate Diversity" seeds network, have reacted angrily to the new legislation, which, they say, shows that its authors are completely out of touch with what is happening on the ground. After several decades of relative inactivity, hundreds of European traditional farmers are now enthusiastically participating in the selection of varieties being bred to respond to their current needs. These are varieties that can be grown organically without chemical inputs, that are suited to small-scale processing and that can be marketed locally.

However, as these varieties have not been commercially cultivated for many decades, they are not regarded as "traditional" and thus do not enjoy the rights of conservation varieties. As the French seeds network Réseau Semences Paysannes puts it, "this directive won't help to conserve the tiny remaining part of the living heritage of the peasant world of work".

Peasant organisations all over Europe have complained bitterly that, despite repeated requests that their views be taken into account, they were excluded from the discussions that led to the formulation of the enabling legislation. The Spanish seed network Resembrando e Intercambiando is calling for a new consultation process that will lead to an effective directive that responds to peasant farmers' real needs. 