

“Defending livestock diversity is not a matter of genes but of collective rights.”

Wilderswil Declaration, 6 September 2007

Livestock diversity still threatened

Interlaken conference ducks the issues

GRAIN*

An international conference to debate the future of animal genetic resources was organised by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) from 3 to 7 September 2007 in Interlaken, Switzerland. It was attended by almost 300 people from more than 100 countries. Governments adopted the “Interlaken Declaration” and agreed on a “Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources”. This was the first major intergovernmental conference to address the problem of how to reduce the rapidly dwindling diversity of livestock breeds of the few dozen animal species that are used in agriculture and pastoralism for food, fibre, fuel and power, as well as for social, cultural and environmental purposes.

In preparation for the conference, the FAO had compiled a “State of the World” report on animal genetic resources, which gives a comprehensive but alarming overview of the problem (*see* Box 1). The FAO has classified more than 7,600 different domestic livestock breeds currently in existence. These have been developed and nurtured by farming and pastoralist communities since the dawn of agriculture, but at least 700 breeds are now extinct and 20 per cent of the remainder are considered at risk of extinction. During the last 6 years alone, recorded extinction rates have increased (62 breeds lost), rising towards the loss of almost one breed per month.

FAO acknowledges that this drastic fall in the number of breeds is only part of the problem, as genetic diversity within even the most common breeds is also in decline. FAO rightly highlights the main cause of this: “The rapid spread of large-scale industrial livestock production focused on a narrow range of breeds is the biggest threat to the world’s farm animal diversity”. It has led, it says, to “the marginalisation of traditional production systems and the associated local breeds”. As documented elsewhere in this Seedling, livestock breeding and production is increasingly dominated by a handful of transnational corporations that drive local breeds and, indeed, pastoralists and small-scale livestock farmers, into extinction. The same corporations are using the threat of a global pandemic of avian flu to tighten their grip on the industry by pushing for the elimination of small-scale, diverse poultry flocks as a preventive measure.

With the problem squarely on the table, one would have expected the debate in Interlaken to focus on how to deal with the combined threat of the industrialisation of livestock-keeping and the increasing control over it in the hands of a few corporations. This was hardly the case, with the exception of a debate, organised by the IPC for food sovereignty and Swissaid, in which delegates from the Network of Farmers and Peasant Organisations in West Africa (ROPPA) and Union Paysanne, Canada, the Quebec smallholder farmers’

* with additional material from
Patrick Mulvany



Box 1: FAO's report on the world's genetic diversity

The report on the State of the World's Animal Genetic Diversity is based on submissions from 169 countries, 9 organisations and 12 thematic studies, backed by numerous reports and papers. It is comprehensive and covers all dimensions of domestic livestock development and use, from their origins, status and threats, to trends in production, legislation and methods for the conservation of diversity. The introduction to the domestication of livestock and its current parlous state is compelling. The report notes that "The crowding out of local breeds is set to accelerate in many developing countries, unless special provisions are made for their in situ conservation by providing livestock keepers with appropriate support", and that "The costs of implementing an in situ breed conservation programme may be relatively small". But it warns against using CBD-type Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) measures to fund this work, as it notes that "governments rather than farmers benefit". It also identifies the problem of monopolies in the livestock breeding industry and that this concentration is fuelled by intellectual property rights systems. The report ends with a short chapter on future challenges, which concludes that "some indigenous breeds have unique traits and are ... important components of our future food security and cultural heritage. ... Most policies which sustain small-scale low external input production systems will, in general, favour maintaining a greater diversity."

organisation, stressed the devastating impact of the industrialisation and concentration of livestock production on traditional livestock keepers and therefore on livestock diversity.

The Global Plan of Action (*see* Box 2), adopted by the conference, talks a lot about compiling inventories, doing more research, creating *in situ* conservation areas and *ex situ* genebanks, developing policies and building capacity, but hardly deals with the real causes behind the destruction. It seems more concerned about securing access for corporations to rapidly disappearing genes than defending livestock diversity. Even the section on "sustainable use" doesn't address the central problem, but rather contents itself with unspecific proposals on the need for agro-ecosystems approaches, support to indigenous production systems, inclusion of livestock keepers and so on. The question of how to achieve these, when industrial production systems and the corporations behind them are not challenged, is not addressed.

Some of the debates around the Plan were mind-boggling. Australia started a discussion proposing that any conservation policies should be "non-trade distorting", thus essentially ruling out any possibility that countries would be able to regulate their livestock sectors to favour pastoralists and indigenous and small-scale livestock farmers. It took almost a day to water that down to the requirement that any policies should be consistent with "existing international agreements", which the industrialised countries could accept, as it neatly establishes the WTO agreements as the overriding force to police countries that might otherwise want to prioritise the conservation of their biodiversity.

A timid attempt to confirm that local livestock keepers have rights that should be honoured was diluted to an acknowledgement that they make "contributions" to animal genetic resources, and a reference to "relevant rights that may exist at the national level". The crucial issue of patents and other intellectual property rights, at a time when transnational corporations are increasingly monopolising animal genetic resources, was almost ignored.

Although the FAO talked about "an important step" having been taken towards saving the world's domestic animal biodiversity, it remains to be seen what real follow-up will materialise. While the people concerned about seed diversity at least have a legally binding treaty at the FAO, what was agreed in Interlaken is voluntary and grossly underfunded. At the closing of the Interlaken conference none of the delegates dared to speculate about whether a legally binding instrument for animal genetic diversity is even to be considered.

Meanwhile, in Wilderswil ...

Parallel to the FAO conference, a "Livestock Diversity Forum" was held in the small nearby village of Wilderswil, bringing together representatives of smallholder farmers' and pastoralists' organisations as well as NGOs from around the world. Whereas the FAO Conference failed to deal with the main issues behind the destruction of livestock diversity, the participants in this Forum got right to the heart of the issue. Their declaration, which was read to the FAO conference, puts it in the following way: "The industrial model of livestock production is causing the destruction of our animal diversity as well as our own livelihoods. (...) Furthermore, this model



Box 2: The Interlaken Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources


The Interlaken Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources has 23 “strategic priorities” divided into four areas: 1) characterisation, inventory and monitoring of trends and associated risks; 2) sustainable use and development ; 3) conservation; 4) policies, institutions and capacity-building. None of the actions directly addresses the genetic meltdown caused by the industrial livestock industry that places our future food security at risk. However, some seven actions are proposed that could at least mitigate severe genetic erosion and would provide the basis required for future post-industrial animal production, if promoted by FAO, funded sufficiently and implemented as the top priority. These include: explicit reference to the promotion of agro-ecosystems approaches; support for indigenous and local production systems and associated knowledge systems; the strengthening of *in situ* conservation programmes and human capacity; raising national awareness; and developing national and international policies and regulatory and legal frameworks that will help to reduce losses of livestock diversity.

of production is based on a dangerously narrow genetic base of the world’s livestock, propped up by the widespread use of veterinary drugs. Yet this risky and high-cost system is providing more and more of our food.”

The participants in the Livestock Diversity Forum continued with an analysis of how industrial livestock breeding and production are the real cause of the problems, and how the world needs a radical reorientation in this respect. They committed themselves to this, working within the framework of food sovereignty. The central focus of their proposal is the defence of the collective rights and interests of pastoralists and other (small-scale) livestock keepers, who are the real custodians of livestock genetic diversity. “We are committed to fighting for our lands, territories and grazing pastures, our migratory routes, including trans-boundary routes. We will build alliances with other social movements with similar aims and continue to build international solidarity. We will fight for the rights of livestock keepers, which include the right to land, water, veterinary and other services, culture, education and training, access to local markets, access to information and decision making, that are all essential for truly sustainable livestock production systems.”

The Declaration ends with a strong message about the governments’ action plan: “The social organisations of pastoralists, herders and farmers have no interest in participating in a plan which does not address the central causes behind the destruction of livestock diversity but rather provides crutches for a collapsing global livestock production system. Because the Global Plan of Action does not challenge industrial livestock production, we reinforce our commitment to organise ourselves, to save livestock diversity and to counter the negative forces bearing on us. However, we remain open and willing to

participate in any useful follow-up that might be facilitated through FAO.”

For social movements, the issue of livestock diversity is now on their agenda, and awareness is now higher. It is to be hoped that civil society will take more interest and address the serious underlying problems. Another model of livestock production is possible. 

For further information:

- FAO, The State of the World’s animal genetic resources for food and agriculture, Rome, 2007.
<http://tinyurl.com/26afyy>
- FAO, Report of the International Technical Conference on Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, (includes the Interlaken Declaration and the Plan of Action)
<http://tinyurl.com/28doso>
- IISD, Earth Negotiations Bulletin, summary of the first international technical conference on animal genetic resources for food and agriculture.
<http://www.iisd.ca/biodiv/angr/>
- “Wilderswil declaration on livestock diversity”
<http://www.grain.org/bio-ipr/?id=522>
- Seedling (2007), “Reclaiming livestock keepers’ rights”
<http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=459>

