



**QUNO**

Quaker United Nations Office

# Are small-scale farmers at the table?

Reflections on small-scale farmers' participation  
in global and national decision-making

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## Acknowledgements

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Cover photo: US AID Horticultural Innovation Laboratory. Picture is from central Uganda near Mukono

## Food & Sustainability

The Food & Sustainability programme of the Quaker United Nations Office addresses the complex and intertwined issues of trade and innovation policy and how they relate to poverty, hunger and food insecurity. We look at these issues with a particular focus on small-scale farmers, including fisherfolk, forest dwellers and pastoralists, a critical yet largely unheard voice in trade and innovation policy-making. Our work is collaborative, providing the space where it is safe to think, share and explore creative alternatives to a food system that does not work for the majority of the world's population.

Half the world's food today is produced by 1.5 billion small-scale farmers. The figure is higher for food produced in the non-industrialized world—up to 80%. Small-scale farmers are stewards of biodiversity; they maintain, adapt, improve and distribute plant varieties. The agricultural biological diversity they enhance and develop provides a major contribution to health and nutrition. They find ways to deal with new pests and disease. They are also active players in critical ecosystem processes, developing and adapting ideas for nutrient cycling, effective water use and the maintenance of soil fertility, both traditional and from elsewhere. Who could be better placed to help the world cope with global environmental change and feed the world than over a billion small-scale farmers living, working and experimenting on the front lines of change?

Our work aims to ensure that trade and innovation policy are supportive of, and do not undermine, the critical role of small-scale farmers in providing local and global food security and the resilience we will need to facing ever-increasing environmental change.

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## Summary

This policy brief offers information on the following:

- The importance of small-scale farmer representation in international discussions related to food and nutrition security; innovation; climate change; human rights and the sustainable development goals.
- The challenges in ensuring such representation, particularly because small-scale farmers, indeed farmers in general, are a highly diverse group.
- The need for guidelines or lessons to help countries identify and ensure the full spectrum of small-scale farmer interests have an adequate and effective voice in negotiating processes and in project proposals and development.

It concludes by making six recommendations for how multilateral institutions that host negotiations or dialogues can encourage and facilitate the participation of small-scale farmers.

## Introduction

The voices of small-scale farmers are not adequately represented within international institutions that relate to food security, genetic resources, innovation, intellectual property, trade and sustainable development. The discussions that happen and the decisions taken within these forums have widespread economic, environmental, social, and cultural implications for small-scale farmers, indigenous groups and other people working in rural areas. Also, greater participation of small-scale farmers is needed in decision-making processes at the national level as this can influence policy positions taken internationally. In addition, they need to be integral to agriculture, rural development and food security oriented proposals and projects funded by country donors and foundations.

Their voices and participation need to be heard not only because policies or decisions can have far-reaching implications for small-scale farmers, but because small-scale farmers have valuable experiences, innovations, and information to share that need to be considered by global and national policy-makers and donors

to make sound policy and take effective action.

Most people are unaware that at least 70% of the food we consume is produced by the world's 1.5 billion small-scale farmers. Nor do most people make the connection that feeding humanity in the face of climate change depends on the world's small-scale farmers maintaining and developing agricultural biodiversity.<sup>1</sup>

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 support of

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1 “The spread of capital and technology-intensive “industrial agriculture in the modern era has been accompanied by an erosion of on-farm genetic diversity, a loss of local knowledge, and the abandonment of traditional farming practices. [...] Agricultural biodiversity and the diversity of management practices employed within traditional farming systems provide small-scale farmers with the ability to cope with external stresses and fluctuations [...]” Smith, C., Elliott D., Bragdon, S. H. 2015. Realizing the right to food in an era of climate change. Geneva: QUNO.

small-scale farmers at the heart of its management.

Unfortunately, small-scale farmers and representatives from farmers' organizations are often not present at negotiation tables at all. And some forums even lack participation by civil society organizations representing small-scale farmer interests. (see Table 1, beginning on page 11).

## Challenges

To achieve the participation of small-scale farmers in an equitable and comprehensive manner is far from straightforward. Social, cultural, and economic circumstances vary widely from household to household; most countries are highly heterogeneous ecologically; the availability of inputs, distance from markets, access to information and technology, all vary widely from one location to another. These factors combine to make small-scale farmers, indeed farmers in general, a highly diverse group.

The situation is exacerbated in that not only are farmers themselves highly diverse but so are the groups

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The needs and challenges facing small-scale farmers and agricultural biodiversity therefore need to be directly part of policy dialogue and project selection. Without this perspective, we may lose the foundations for healthy people and a healthy planet.

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that seek to serve and represent their interests. These include such organizations as farmers' unions, associations and cooperatives organized on a communal, provincial or national level, or along commodity lines. Developmental or other civil society organizations, many having a strong political agenda, may also seek to represent small-scale farmer interests.

Given this situation, it is important that the full spectrum of interests has an adequate and effective voice in national and international policy negotiations and dialogue, as well as in project proposals and development. Without an effective voice, special interests or particular interests may be able to capture the policy agenda or proposal process.

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Farmers' organizations, producer cooperatives, grower associations and the like often have very different perspectives and agendas from rural based NGOs. It is therefore important that the farmers' organizations, *particularly those representing small-scale or more marginalized populations have an effective voice.*

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How is better representation of the full range of farmers, but particularly the small and most marginalized, achieved? To appropriately represent a country's situation, there needs to be strong participation by the full range of farmers from different parts of the country. With information and time, better resourced large or medium-scale farmers are likely to be better equipped to participate. The situation will always be more difficult for the smaller and more marginalized farmers. There is an urgent need for more experience on the practicalities of securing the input of highly diverse farmer groups.

Regarding participation in inter-governmental forums the problem is likely four-fold:

1. International bodies do not always welcome the participation of civil society.
2. Where participation is welcomed, the time, capacity and financial resources required to obtain observer status, attend meetings and host side events may preclude small-scale farmers' participation.
3. Small-scale farmers may not see the value of their participation, because the impacts of decisions made at the international level are not always clear.
4. As elaborated above, there is also the challenge of identifying who is qualified to represent farmers from a particular country or region.

Particularly where small-scale farmers are not representing themselves, active engagement by civil society is important. The role of QUNO and other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in promoting participation is to:

- Become accredited observers and amplify the voices of small-scale farmers at the international level through research and consultation with small-scale farmers that are reflected in technical and policy briefs, written and oral statements and side events;
- Encourage secretariats to increase farmers' representation within their constituencies by establishing funding mechanisms;
- Help make two-way connections between discussions and decisions that get made at the international level and the potential impact on small-scale farmers' food security by conducting research, hosting dialogues and consultations that include small-scale farmers.

## Participation

Small-scale farmers' participation can take several different forms, including but not limited to:

- Farmers' organizations, CSOs and NGOs becoming

**Observer status** allows non-members to attend and sometimes to participate in discussions. Non-members may be accredited as permanent observers, or be invited on an ad hoc basis to observe particular meetings or sessions.

**Side events** are an opportunity for civil society to provide members with information on their activities, additional perspectives on relevant issues, and distribute supplementary documents during meetings or sessions. Events are held in separate rooms during breaks in negotiations.

**Access to information** on discussions and decisions made within international forums can be facilitated through the online posting of meeting documents and reports in a timely manner in multiple languages. Secretariats may in some cases communicate with the public beyond formal documentation, and in other cases the responsibility to communicate may rest with individual members' focal points. Observers that post online about ongoing discussion and 'sticking points' within negotiations are an important information channel.

- accredited observers and contribute written and oral statements, though as noted above care needs to be given that CSO and NGO are providing authentic and genuine representation;
- Secretariats consulting directly with representatives from farmers' organizations,
  - indigenous communities and other people working in rural areas;
  - CSOs hosting side events during meetings and including small-scale farmers;
  - Information on discussions and decisions made during meetings being made publicly available.

## The Right to Participate

The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, or Aarhus Convention, and its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs) empower people with the rights to access information easily, participate effectively in decision-making in environmental matters and to seek justice if their rights were violated. While the Aarhus Convention primarily addresses issues at the national level, its Parties have committed themselves, through Article 3, Paragraph 7, of the Convention, to promote the application of the principles of the Convention in international environmental decision-making processes and within the framework of international organizations in matters relating to the environment [...] (UNECE, Almaty Guidelines, 2005). See also Finnegan, L., Roberts, E. Building. 2013. *Peace Around Water, Land and Food: Policy and Practice for Preventing Conflict*. Geneva: QUNO.

The Right to Participate in decision making is reflected in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Articles 10, 11, 19, 28, 29 and 32). Governments therefore have a duty to consult with indigenous communities when their decisions may affect Indigenous Peoples.

Table I: Participation within relevant international forums

	CBD <sup>2</sup>	Nagoya Protocol <sup>4</sup>	CFS <sup>8</sup>
Inclusivity and Observers	Broad and clear criteria for granting observer status. Meetings of the COP attract a significant number of observers, and importance of participation is explicitly recognized. Working groups include regional representation of CSOs and indigenous and local communities. <sup>3</sup>	Same rules and procedures as CBD. Meetings held concurrently with CBD COP. CSOs and indigenous and local communities represented in ABS Working Group to negotiate text. <sup>5</sup>	CSO participation coordinated through Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) (currently 96 members). Some concerns regarding inclusivity and transparency. Distinction between observer and participant not clear.
Side Events	Yes	Yes	Yes. Side events coordinated through CSM.
Access to Info	All documents available online in all official UN languages.	All documents available online in E, F, S, R. <sup>6</sup> Live webinar online. IISD Earth Negotiations Bulletin provides information channel. <sup>7</sup>	All documents available online; The CFS Bulletin, published online by IISD provides information channel.
Funding for ILC and SSF	Voluntary funding mechanism for indigenous and local communities from developing countries. Ten grants awarded in April 2016.	CBD funding mechanism for indigenous and local communities applies.	None

2 Convention on Biological Diversity. See also <https://www.cbd.int/>.

3 Conference of the Parties (COP). Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

4 The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity. See also <https://www.cbd.int/abs/>.

5 Working Group on Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS).

6 The official UN languages are Arabic (A), Chinese (C), English (E), French (F), Russian (R) and Spanish (S). Other language abbreviations used in this table include Italian (I) and German (G) International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).

7 International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). Committee on World Food Security. See also <http://www.fao.org/cfs/en/>.

8 Committee on World Food Security. See also <http://www.fao.org/cfs/en/>.

**Table I: Participation within relevant international forums (continued)**

	ITPGRFA <sup>9</sup>	UNFCCC <sup>11</sup>	IGC <sup>12</sup>
<b>Inclusivity and Observers</b>	Broad and clear criteria for granting observer status. Farmers organizations invited to participate in working groups, but expenses borne by participant organizations.	Clear criteria for granting observer status. Farmers organizations invited to participate in working groups.	Open to all accredited intergovernmental and NGOs with permanent observer status at WIPO. Ad hoc observers accredited at beginning of meetings. Clear criteria. Currently ~300 organizations have observer status. <sup>13</sup>
<b>Side Events</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Access to Info</b>	All meeting documents are made available online in all UN official languages and circulated to observers in advance.	All documents available online in all official UN languages. Meetings are also webcast on UNFCCC's website.	Official documents available online in E, F, S another other UN languages as resources allow.
<b>Funding for ILC and SSF</b>	None <sup>10</sup>	None	Voluntary fund to cover travel expenses of accredited observers which are representatives of local or indigenous communities; no funding currently available. Voluntary fund has been depleted since 2014. <sup>14</sup>

9 International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. See also <http://www.fao.org/plant-treaty/en/>.

10 “Even funding for developing countries to participate is near depletion.” Stated at Preparing for the Seventh Session of the Governing Body: 2017 Outlook side event, organized by the IT, at the 16th Regular Session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture in Rome, Italy on January 30 – February 3, 2017.

11 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. See also <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>.

12 World Intellectual Property Organization, Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore. See also <http://wipo.int/tk/en/igc/>.

13 Non-Governmental Organization (NGO).

14 See WIPO/GRTKF/IC/33/3 document prepared for the 33rd session of the IGC taking place February 27-March 3, 2017: [http://wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/tk/en/wipo\\_grtkf\\_ic\\_33/wipo\\_grtkf\\_ic\\_33\\_3.pdf](http://wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/tk/en/wipo_grtkf_ic_33/wipo_grtkf_ic_33_3.pdf)

Table I: Participation within relevant international forums (continued)

	CDIP <sup>15</sup>	WIPO <sup>16</sup>	HRC <sup>18</sup>
<b>Inclusivity and Observers</b>	Open to all accredited intergovernmental and NGOs with permanent observer status at WIPO. Applications for ad hoc observer status due two months and a half before the CDIP meeting. Clear criteria.	Clear yet strict criteria for accreditation. Currently 79 NGOs and 258 INGOs listed as permanent observers. <sup>17</sup>	NGOs with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) may observe meetings, consult, and submit written and oral statements to the Council. Subsidiary bodies require greater farmer input. Observers may send video statements.
<b>Side Events</b>	Yes	Yes	NGOs with ECOSOC status may host ‘parallel events’ during sessions.
<b>Access to Info</b>	Official documents available online in E, F, S another other UN languages as resources allow.	Official documents available online in E, F, S another other UN languages as resources allow.	All documents available online in all official UN languages.
<b>Funding for ILC and SSF</b>	None	None	Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations provides travel grants for sessions, meetings, and consultations. 113 grants awarded in January 2016.

15 World Intellectual Property Organization, Committee on Development and Intellectual Property. See also <http://www.wipo.int/policy/en/cdip/>.

16 World Intellectual Property Organization. See also <http://www.wipo.int/portal/en/>.

17 International Non-Governmental Organization.

18 United Nations Human Rights Council. See also <http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/pages/hrcindex.aspx>.

Table I: Participation within relevant international forums (continued)

	WTO <sup>19</sup>	TRIPS Council <sup>21</sup>
<b>Inclusivity and Observers</b>	Only intergovernmental organizations and INGOs may be accredited. CSO participation limited to WTO Public Forum.	Only intergovernmental organizations and INGOs may be accredited.
<b>Side Events</b>	No	No
<b>Access to Info</b>	Official documents available online; information channels TWN and IP Watch. <sup>20</sup>	Regular meeting documents available online in English only, special session documents not available.
<b>Funding for ILC and SSF</b>	None	None

19 World Trade Organization. See also <https://www.wto.org/>.

20 Third World Network (TWN) and Intellectual Property Watch (IP Watch).

21 Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. See also [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/trips\\_e/trips\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/trips_e.htm).

Table I: Participation within relevant international forums (continued)

	ICN2 <sup>22</sup>	UPOV <sup>24</sup>
Inclusivity and Observers	No Civil Society Mechanism (CSM). At ICN2 in 2014, a 'non-state' actor model was adopted. Pre-session events were held, during which civil society could agree on content of oral statement to be given during session.	Only intergovernmental organizations and INGOs may be accredited. No clear set of criteria for determining 'competence in the areas of direct relevance' to UPOV; interpretation of existing guidelines for accreditation has been narrow.
Side Events	No. Civil society can present the outcomes of the pre-conference events. <sup>23</sup>	Yes
Access to Info	Meeting documents available in E, and I.	Some documents available online; others are password protected for Member States only. The South Centre provides information channel on discussions. <sup>25</sup>
Funding for ILC and SSF	None	None

22 International Conference on Nutrition. See also <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/icn2/en/>. In particular, concern was voiced with regard to civil society participation within ICN2 (2014) processes (FIAN, 2014).

23 Presentations are available online at <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/icn2/friday-21-november/en/> (IISD, 2014).

24 International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants. See also <http://www.upov.int/portal/index.html.en>.

25 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAr5LWekWFNYSUdLj28seZQ>

## Recommendations

Ensuring that small-scale farmers are at the table is essential for more balanced discussions to take place within decision making forums. But within almost all relevant international forums, direct participation of small-scale farmers is lacking. The Committee on Food Security (CFS) is an exception; nevertheless, it will be important to ensure that the functioning of the Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) remains transparent with a growing membership that may be less familiar with its workings than those who have been active since the CSM reform in 2009.

The World Intellectual Property Organization, Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (WIPO IGC) and World Intellectual Property Organization, Committee on Development and Intellectual Property (CDIP), the International Treaty and the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) working group on the rights of peasants are key forums where dialogues on small-scale farmers' rights are currently taking place, and where small-scale

farmers themselves need to be represented more.

First and foremost, we recommend on-the ground work to generate practical experience which can be used to develop guidelines or lessons on how a country ensures the full spectrum of farmer interests, in particular small-scale farmer interests, has an adequate and effective voice in negotiating processes and in project proposals and development. The guidelines or lessons learned can then be presented to intergovernmental bodies. Without authentic and representative selection, the value of any participation is diminished. We reiterate that there is therefore an urgent need for more experience on the practicalities of obtaining the input of highly diverse farmer groups, and in particular of the smallest and most marginalized farmers.

About intergovernmental discussions and negotiations, QUNO recommends that:

1. Clear and broad criteria be adopted and broadly interpreted for accrediting as observers: individuals, representatives from farmers' organizations and CSOs

that have a vested interest in the livelihoods and food security of small-scale farmers.

2. Funding mechanisms be established under each treaty to facilitate small-scale farmers' direct participation.
3. Video contributions be allowed and encouraged from observers, including small-scale farmers, who cannot be present at meetings.
4. All provisional and official meeting documents, decisions and reports be made available online in a timely manner in all UN official languages.
5. Secretariats communicate above and beyond official meeting documents and consult directly with small-scale farmers, thus sharing in the responsibility of countries' focal points for each treaty.
6. Secretariats ensure the right of participation and access to information and justice, particularly ensuring that it extends to small-scale farmers and others living in rural areas.







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