



NAT-V-037

107th plenary session, 25 and 26 June 2014

OPINION

Agricultural genetic resources – from conservation to sustainable use

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- is concerned about the fact, acknowledged in the report, that the Community programme, which has developed over the years, has failed to prevent a "continued loss of agricultural biodiversity";
- stresses the need for an about turn in the relationship between research and use, so that the scientific research depends on the specific needs of farmers;
- calls on the Commission to mobilise resources to make the operational information and the work of the focus group on genetic resources more widely available;
- points out that the beneficiaries of the Community programme on the conservation, collection, characterisation and utilisation of genetic resources in agriculture were mainly research institutes and that it is now necessary to encourage wider participation of end-users in the new programme;
- requests that the new proposal for a regulation on the production and making available on the market of plant reproductive material provide for proper support to small and medium-sized producers and users of old, rare and traditional varieties and "niche" varieties, which make up a significant share of the genetic diversity of cultivated plant species;
- requests that the new proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the production and making available on the market of plant reproductive material allow for organic seed to be certified on the basis of criteria adapted to organic production, thereby allowing the development of plants according to the environment and the evolution of strains and populations.

Rapporteur

Giuseppe Varacalli, mayor of Gerace (Reggio Calabria), (IT/PES)

Reference document

Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on agricultural genetic resources: from conservation to sustainable use – COM(2013) 838 final

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions
Agricultural genetic resources – from conservation to sustainable use

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. notes that the European strategy for the conservation and sustainable use of agricultural genetic resources contained in the Commission report, submitted to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee, derives from the commitments made by the EU aimed at halting the gradual loss of biodiversity in the EU by 2020;
2. points out that this strategy originates, in particular, in the commitments made under the Convention on Biodiversity, adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, followed over time by significant international implementing agreements such as the Cartagena Protocol (2000), the FAO's International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (2004) and, more recently, the Nagoya Protocol on access and benefit-sharing as regards the use of biodiversity (2010);
3. considers that EU intervention here is anchored in two major policy areas: firstly, rural development policy, with its considerable set of agri-environmental measures and the effective activity of the European Innovation Partnership; and secondly, research and innovation policy, via its framework programme Horizon 2020, as regards detailing and fine-tuning the knowledge base on genetic diversity in agriculture; further considers that this intervention should be rooted in legislation on plant and animal products and in agricultural policy itself in order to ensure the diversity of the genetic pool used by all farmers;
4. for various and overlapping reasons, believes that the gradual depletion of biodiversity is a particular concern for local communities and the institutions that represent them, given the objective impact of biodiversity loss on their regions;
5. indeed, points out here that local and regional authorities have a considerable remit in terms of managing biodiversity in their local areas, including, for instance, the whole area of issuing authorisations for the use of natural resources, as well as their prerogatives in terms of managing Natura 2000 sites, which constitute one of the cornerstones of EU action on biodiversity, and their remit in co-financing rural development programmes, together with cross-border cooperation, which should be stepped up in order to improve the management and exchange of information, as many genetic resources can be shared in cross-border areas;
6. therefore advocates stepping up efforts to involve local and regional authorities on an increasingly systematic and practical basis in programmes aimed at the conservation and

sustainable use of genetic resources in agriculture, bolstered by effective legal instruments and sufficient financial resources to enable effective intervention in this field;

7. points out that, on the specific issue of financial resources, the Commission states in the report's conclusions (Section 9) that "towards 2020, genetic resources can rely on greater financial resources and a wider range of funding opportunities as provided under Rural Development and Horizon 2020 as well as under other Union policies"; however, this assertion needs to be objectively verifiable as to the actual availability of additional resources, which should be made available as soon as possible, and due consideration should be given to the fact that the bulk of EU funds allocated to conserving genetic diversity in agriculture concerns the research sector;
8. highlights, as regards the prospective activities in this area set out in the report, the importance of the legal and institutional framework underpinning the area of genetic resources, which at EU level essentially comprises, in addition to the aforementioned basis of rural development policies and the EU framework for research and innovation, legislation on plant and animal products and, more broadly, agricultural policy itself;
9. reaffirms, in connection with rural development policy, the points made by this Committee in its recent opinion *The sustainability of rural areas* (adopted on 9 October 2013), with particular regard to the potential of rural areas highlighted therein, not least in terms of biodiversity;
10. reiterates that initiatives here fit within a specific global context, the cornerstone of which is the aforementioned FAO International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, to which the EU has signed up; this provides a framework for coordinating and promoting initiatives in the area of managing plant genetic resources, and makes the conservation of genetic diversity legally binding for the acceding States;
11. points out that the EU has devoted a good deal of time to the issue of conserving agricultural genetic diversity, most recently in 2010 with the decision by EU Heads of State to halt biodiversity loss in the EU by 2020, and the commitments made to this end, which were subsequently incorporated into the EU biodiversity strategy adopted in 2011; however, notes that this work has not yet delivered results;
12. is concerned about the fact, acknowledged in the report, that the Community programme, which has developed over the years, has failed to prevent a "continued loss of agricultural biodiversity"; in this regard, the Committee would endorse the direction taken by the Commission, viewing the conservation approach as one of the keys to the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources;
13. believes, however, that this approach, which is to be further developed and diversified, has not produced the desired effects as regards the use of these resources; on the contrary, limited

involvement of end-users is reported. The aim should be to bridge the considerable gap that clearly still exists between research results and the actual sustainable use of genetic resources;

14. is pleased to note that the report, which specifically emphasises this point, focuses on the need for an about turn in the relationship between research and use, in the sense that the scientific research should depend on the specific needs of farmers, who are the key recipients of the solutions provided by research, and in order to ensure food security and the production of active ingredients useful for the pharmaceutical and chemical industry;
15. notes that a focus group on genetic resources was set up at the end of 2013. Unfortunately, information on the focus group's work is available only in English, which will limit the spread of information to end-users. It is therefore particularly important that the Commission mobilise resources to make the operational information more widely available;
16. welcomes the Commission's emphasis on the multi-level governance approach needed for a comprehensive and holistic policy that is able to strike the necessary balance between the research and innovation policy dimension and rural development policy;
17. also considers it necessary, however, as stated in the report, that existing databases and collections be made more accessible, so that more effective use can be made of them, given that in many cases a lack of knowledge about these collections is undermining their potential usefulness;
18. also points to the need for the conservation approach to go hand in hand with a systematic joined-up approach, so as to enable stable working relations between those involved in various capacities in the process, which needs to start at farm level with a focus on traditional and local breeds and crops. Steps must also be taken to promote substantial use by farmers of traditional and local breeds and crops, by means of a package of measures aiming to restore and boost biodiversity at farm level;
19. in this regard, endorses the provision in the report to set up "Union-wide networks to valorise such material..."; this means of achieving integration must provide for real bottom-up participation, also involving local and regional authorities;
20. concurs regarding the need for a strong commitment from local and regional authorities, in the light of the fact that the report specifically calls on decision makers and administrations, inter alia, to " ... engage in developing the institutional and legal framework in a manner that is consistent ... ", in order to achieve the desired result;
21. considers useful the further clarification by the Commission of "a major revision of the legislation ...", with a view to finding practical ways of enhancing procedures for conserving resources, not least by means of cooperation between the different sectors involved, coupled with improvements in market access for traditional varieties, together with actual use by

farmers of genetic material that would naturally be more diversified than at present, a requirement that the proposed regulation should do more to take into account;

22. endorses the principle of an integrated decision-making process, and would like to see local and regional authorities play a key part, working to safeguard the many specific features of their local areas, and the specific genetic features of the plants and animals connected to them, that are worth protecting, and making their contribution to joining up the work of the main players more directly involved (scientists, farmers, breeders, consumers, etc.), whose distinct roles are summed up neatly in the report;
23. society needs to be made aware of the value of genetic resources and the importance of conservation, research and sustainable use where these are concerned. At the same time, training programmes should be promoted for engineers and farmers, along with coordination, monitoring and assessment measures to safeguard biodiversity in the agricultural sector;
24. thus particularly welcomes the strong emphasis placed on the mechanisms of the European Innovation Partnership "Agricultural productivity and sustainability" (with the parallel involvement of the Committee on Genetic Resources established by Regulation (EC) 870/2004), as a practical means of stepping up the integration between research activities and various uses of genetic resources, and with the stated aim of adapting to the context and to local needs;
25. along the same lines of ensuring an effective knowledge exchange between all stakeholders, would also suggest encouraging forms of cooperation within and between individual local communities, as a virtuous system of experiences that can be discussed and can feed into each other organically;
26. suggests that a logo developed and financed by the Commission be established for products from endangered and/or preserved and developed genetic resources. The conditions for this logo should be established with a view to encouraging and supporting producers and other local/regional stakeholders;
27. expresses the concern, which is also openly expressed in the report, that the weighty scientific work carried out over the years has not had much impact on farmers/end-users; it must also be pointed out that the report of the group of independent experts on the Community programme on the conservation, collection, characterisation and utilisation of genetic resources in agriculture, governed by above-mentioned Council Regulation 870/2004, noted that the beneficiaries of the programme were mainly research institutes, whence the need to encourage wider participation of end-users in the new programme, mainly so as to achieve the programme's objectives, with particular regard to actual *in-situ* use of its results, including appropriate incentives for calls for tender;

28. notes that the *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the production and making available on the market of plant reproductive material* (COM(2013) 262 final), which ties in closely with the issues being considered here, was rejected by the European Parliament on 11 March 2014;
29. is thus duly committed to monitoring developments in this matter closely, with revision of the proposed regulation as an absolute priority, pointing out, meanwhile, with reference to the content of this proposal, the evident and important need to support small and medium-sized producers and users of old, rare and traditional varieties and "niche" varieties, which make up a significant share of the genetic diversity of cultivated plant species, the producers of which are not adequately protected by the provision of cumbersome recognition procedures and for which use in suitable local conditions does not receive sufficient support, in view of the fact that it is in the direct interest of local and regional authorities that these producers, who are best placed to secure biodiversity and who operate within limited geographical areas, do not encounter excessive operational difficulties;
30. requests that the new proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the production and making available on the market of plant reproductive material allow for organic seed to be certified on the basis of criteria adapted to organic production, thereby allowing the development of plants according to the environment and the evolution of strains and populations;
31. also believes, in line with its previous opinions, that it is particularly important here that its own position on the issue of the admission and importation of GMOs be clear and well-defined and allow such cases only exceptionally, with specific regard to compatibility with the strategy for the conservation of these genetic resources;

32. on this point, insists on the rigorous application of the precautionary principle in relation to the admission and introduction of GMOs, and on the parallel need for practical coexistence measures to be adopted at each institutional level, aimed at protecting all agricultural areas and, more specifically, those that are more ecologically sensitive, with a precise assessment of the risks to biodiversity being a specific imperative.

Brussels, 26 June 2014

The president
of the
Committee of the Regions

Michel Lebrun

The secretary-general ad interim
of the
Committee of the Regions

Daniel Janssens

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Agricultural genetic resources – from conservation to sustainable use
Reference(s)	COM(2013) 838 final
Legal basis	Article 307(1) TFEU
Procedural basis	Optional referral
Date of Commission letter	28 November 2013
Date of president's decision	4 December 2013
Commission responsible	Commission for Natural Resources
Rapporteur	Giuseppe Varacalli (IT/PES), mayor of Gerace
Analysis	February 2014
Discussed in commission	8 April 2014
Date adopted by commission	8 April 2014
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Unanimity
Date adopted in plenary	26 June 2014
Previous Committee opinions	A new impetus for halting biodiversity loss, CdR 22/2009 fin ¹
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	Not relevant

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[OJ C 211, 4.9.2009, pp. 47-53.](#)