

## PELUM SOUTH AFRICA'S FOOD FIRST WORKING CONFERENCE



### INTRODUCTION

On 28 and 29 Sept over 70 people - small-scale farmers, NGO's and Government - gathered together for the Food First Conference held in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Participants came from South Africa and Lesotho, with guests from Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia. The Conference was organized to re-launch the South African Chapter of PELUM Association. PELUM - short for Participatory Ecological Land Use Management - is an membership-based network of development practitioners in Sub-Saharan Africa that supports smallholder farmers.



The title and focus of the conference: 'Food First', recognized the centrality of high quality, nutritious, appropriate and accessible food to any notion of human development. The 'Food First' concept includes all aspects of food production, distribution, preparation and consumption, and promotes sustainable and locally appropriate approaches to each of these. In addition 'Food First' views access to quality food as an essential human right, rather than seeing food as simply a commodity.

At the Conference, participants shared their experiences in promoting organic farming among small-scale farmers and school children, marketing of organic produce, saving and multiplying indigenous seeds, raising awareness on genetically engineered crops, and the Slow Food movement.

In groups, participants visited an organic shop and organic farm, a health spa with Zulu healing garden run by a traditional healer, and indigenous vegetable gardens linked to a school and a clinic.

An Indigenous Food Fair was held where participants showcased a range of fresh, as well as cooked, preserved and processed traditional and indigenous food products.

### CHALLENGES FACED BY SMALLHOLDER FARMERS

The Conference recognized that farmers have grown dependent on agricultural companies for their farming inputs, including seed. Most commercial seeds cannot be multiplied and have to be bought again during planting season. Local knowledge about seed selection, saving and multiplication is being lost. Intellectual property rights and Patenting Laws further restrict the rights of farmers to save and exchange seeds.

*The court case against a North American Company who bought the name "Rooibos" shows how easily ownership can be claimed over an indigenous, communal resource and how a farming community can be put out of business by individuals driven by commercial interests.*

Global economic forces influence production and consumption patterns that work against indigenous foods and organic farming. In South Africa, traditional foods are considered “backward”, particularly among urban dwellers and rural youth.

Smallholder farmers are faced with extension staff and researchers who think they know what is best for farmers, and continue to offer technologies that don't suit the local, diverse and risk prone conditions in which they work.

*The Traditional Food Promotion Project presented by Elize Mans from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs illustrates that Government staff is starting to recognize the potential of traditional and indigenous technologies to assist farmers in feeding their households and feeding the nation.*

## **DISCUSSION**

Participants expressed concern about the loss of diversity in local and indigenous foods available in South Africa and Africa. This decrease in food diversity has gone hand in hand with the commercialization and mass distribution of a limited selection of species.

*In his keynote speech, Jeff Kahuho from PELUM Kenya stated that of the 3,000 plant species that have been commercialized, which form 1% of the species worldwide, only 20 are being consumed on a large scale. Furthermore, 80% of human energy intake comes from only 15 plant and animals species. And these are not always the most nutritious.*

*Djax Biria from PELUM Tanzania, speaking on behalf of PELUM Association's Chairman, stated that in many parts of Africa, maize - an imported crop that arrived in the region only 150 years ago - has become the single most important crop and food available to urban and rural populations. Indigenous foods such as yams, cassava, millet and sorghum are highly nutritional sources of carbohydrates that have been neglected with time.*

Genetically Engineered (GE) crops are featuring more and more in the agricultural landscape.

*Rose Williams from Biowatch defined Genetically Modified Organisms as organisms whose genetic make up has been altered by the insertion or removal of genetic material to create or enhance “desirable” characteristics. Genetic Engineering is a new kind of biotechnology that can involve the transfer of genes between species unrelated in nature. She expressed concern that the GMO Amendment Bill does not ensure that the Constitutional right of South Africans to a safe environment is upheld and that livelihoods are not threatened.*

The advantages and benefits of GE crops are questioned by many, and the European Union has banned the import of GMO produce. However, African countries, such as the Government of Tanzania, are ambiguous in their stand towards GE Crops. The South African Government actively promotes GMOs, while the information available to the public is too limited to allow for informed decision making.

*Biowatch reported that large-scale trials have been initiated since 1992 with a range of GE crops such as cotton, maize, apple, canola, eucalyptus, potato, soybean, sweet potato,*

tomato and wheat. Neighboring countries fear that the introduction of these crops will have a negative impact also on their environment, biodiversity, and human health.

In South Africa, an imported fast food culture has spread widely. Having a quick meal at a fast food chain is a party favourite, much preferred over a nourishing slow-cooked traditional meal at home.

*The alarming rate of obesity – a form of malnutrition - among youngsters has led some schools to take drastic measures and replace the high sugar content and fatty foods offered in and around the school grounds by more healthy foods and snacks.*

## OUTCOMES

Indigenous crops are well-suited for smallholder farmers. They are drought resistant, can be grown under harsh conditions, and don't need chemical inputs that are very costly to many smallholder farmers. Traditional and indigenous foods can improve nutrition and provide secure access to food, particularly among the poorer and more vulnerable households.



The Indigenous Food Fair showed that many of the local fruits, roots, mushrooms, leaves and herbs have great nutritional value. Many of the indigenous foods are on the verge of extinction and with it their associated indigenous knowledge.

*Farmers from the Limpopo Small-scale Farmers Forum together with the Centre for Rural Community Empowerment were the winners of the Indigenous Food Fundi Award. Their display of indigenous seeds, fresh produce, cooked and preserved foods were matched by a wealth and depth of knowledge articulated especially by the female farmers.*



The idea of a Slow Food Movement, originated in Italy and promoted in Kenya, was met with enthusiasm as it could help mobilize producers and consumers in South Africa to lobby for healthy, nutritious and safe food.

*The Conference defined Slow Food as indigenous, nutritious, healthy and tasty food, organically (or sustainably) produced, that is embedded in local culture, is part of a social experience, directly links producers with consumers, is non-patented and socially just.*

Comparative research into conventional and organic farming can assist farmers in working out the social, economic and ecological benefits of either systems.

*The Eastern Cape Government's Massive Food Programme aimed at engaging Black farmers in large-scale commercial agriculture failed to produce high and good quality yields, increased dependency on external inputs, and represented a consistently low return on investment. In his keynote speech Lawrence Sisitka highlighted that, contrary to popular belief, small farmers achieve at least four to five times greater output per acre.*

Participants recognized the need for independent research into the advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits of Genetically Modified Organisms. This should result in quality information made available to the producers and consumers in a language they understand. Similarly research into selection of and improvements to crop seeds should address the needs and demands of farmers, rather than of commercial companies, and better synergies need to be developed between farmers and scientists.

*In the session on Seed Security there was consensus on the need for farmers to retain ownership of their seeds to ensure future supplies independent of external suppliers. The sharing and exchange of seeds between farmers was also seen as a positive activity reinforcing the social nature of any sustainable agricultural system.*

Food labeling was proposed as key instrument to protect people's right to choose what they want to eat, and to maintain bodily integrity.

There was considerable discussion of the 'New Green Revolution for Africa', an initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates and the Rockefeller Foundations. Although few details were known, the main focus appeared to be on developing improved seeds, making these and other agricultural inputs available to farmers through a network of local agricultural entrepreneurs, and training crop scientists. While any initiative to strengthen agriculture in Africa is to be welcomed, there is concern that the direction apparently being taken by the initiative might be more to the benefit of the seed and fertilizer companies than the farmers. It was agreed that more information was needed, and that PELUM and its partner farmer organisations should seek ways to engage with the initiative to try and ensure that there is adequate attention paid to appropriate technologies, genuinely sustainable agricultural development, and traditional and indigenous foods.

## **PELUM SOUTH AFRICA**

It was resolved to re-launch PELUM in South Africa as a 'living network' driven by initiatives of its members. If no initiatives are undertaken, the network will be dormant. Members were invited to join a task team to help shape PELUM SA.

Three areas of focus were identified:

- 1) Training and capacity enhancement of development practitioners and smallholder farmers;
- 2) Action oriented research, and
- 3) Advocacy, aimed at supporting small-scale farmers in their endeavour to feed their households and to feed the nation in a sustainable manner.

PELUM South Africa further committed itself to assist members of the Eastern and Southern African Small-scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF), in making their voice heard, articulating their issues and concerns, and becoming equal partners in research and development that result in technologies and practices that will improve their standards of living, health and well-being.