Background

Agrobiodiversity is a key asset of the rural poor in developing countries who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods and well-being. The food and nutrition security of the world will depend on the mobilization of intra and inter-specific diversity present in wild and cultivated species that together with suitable management practices will contribute to enhance adaptation and resilience in production systems in the face of climate change.

During its 60 or so years of activity, the international conservation movement of crop genetic resources has assembled more than 7.4 million germplasm samples now safely deposited in 1,750 ex situ gene banks around the world (Plucknett et al. 1987; FAO 2010). While appreciating the contribution of these efforts, it should be also recognized that ex situ conservation activities insofar have been focusing mainly on major staples, commodity crops and their wild relatives. It is a fact that the bulk of useful species to humankind, estimated being at least 7,000 -if we are to consider food crops alone- are largely under-represented in ex situ collections (Padulosi et al. 2002; Gepts 2006, FAO 2010). This situation is of great concern because it is particularly in such species – currently poorly addressed by R&D- that strategic traits to cope with climate change are likely to be found (Padulosi et al. 2011). The importance of these species- often defined ‘neglected and underutilized’ (NUS)- need no further emphasis if we are to also acknowledge their strategic contribution in nutrition, health and income generation (Padulosi and Hoeschle-Zeledon 2004; Hughes 2009; Mahyao et al. 2009; Smith and Longvah 2009).

Contradictory to the good sense that would suggest a fairer representation of agrobiodiversity in gene banks for securing the basis of our food and nutritional security, the world’s agrobiodiversity is today conserved not in gene banks but in situ/on farm, thanks to the work of millions of farmers and users. Such a work is under increasing pressure as a result of the adoption of standardized cultivation practices favoring few major crops, globalization trends and increasing economic competiveness from well established crops. The resulting marginalization and subsequent loss of diversity of local crops and varieties is undermining the very portfolio of options in support of adaptation and resilience we are nowadays searching for to strengthen agricultural production systems.

Whereas important findings on approaches, methods and tools needed for enhancing the competitiveness of local crops and varieties have been developed and successfully tested out (see f.i. Rojas et al. 2009; Padulosi et al. 2010), more and urgent work is needed to support their in situ/on farm conservation. Approaches, guidelines, methods and tools are needed to support particularly NUS and the role of their custodian farmers. More research is needed to shed light on the distribution of NUS diversity on farm -currently extremely poor if not at all described, degree of use by people, how and by whom this diversity is maintained, how it is threatened and where-when-how agrobiodiversity-rich practices facilitate adaptation to climate change. Answering to these questions will be fundamental to guide the development of effective and sustainable conservation strategies while promoting also a more effective integration of ex situ with in situ/on-farm conservation methods.
The Conference
This Meeting is being organized in the framework of an International UN Project financed by IFAD and entitled ‘Reinforcing the resilience of poor rural communities in the face of food insecurity, poverty and climate change through on-farm conservation of local agrobiodiversity’. The project which will be launched in mid 2011 in Nepal, India and Bolivia will be concluded in 2014.

Main Goals:
1) Review biodiversity-rich practices dealing with NUS and identify approaches, methods and tools for participatory assessment of where, when and how these facilitate adaptation to climate change (insurance function of NUS);
2) Develop a methodological framework for community-based agrobiodiversity documentation and monitoring systems on NUS (enhance best practices for on farm conservation).

Specific objectives:
1) Review the state of on farm conservation of NUS through country-based case studies;
2) Share experiences and lessons regarding on farm participatory documentation and monitoring of agrobiodiversity;
3) Understand how best practices on adaptation are influenced and managed by farmers according to gender and other social factors;
4) Review experiences insofar on Red Listing approaches for cultivated species and explore participatory methods to allow assessment of extent of cultivation and use as benchmarks for future monitoring;
5) Review the status of custodian farmers in target countries, their motivations, needs and options for strengthening their role.

Its relevance:
1) The framework emerging from the consultation will be tested out by the IFAD Project in countries directly involved in the Project implementation;
2) Its recommendations will be used as basis for the development of enabling policies in support of in situ/on farm conservation of traditional crops and varieties/NUS around the world.

Expected Products: proceedings and scientific review articles published on participatory documentation and monitoring approaches for cultivated species.

Expected participants: a total of 30-35 from Austria, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, India, Nepal, Romania and Switzerland in addition to experts from Bioversity International, FAO, The International Treaty, IFAD and BMZ/GIZ.

Date and location: Three days (14-15-16 June 2011). Meeting to be held at Friedrichsdorf, within the Hoch-Taunus Nature Park, near Frankfurt, Germany.