



February 2010

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I am writing to update you on the status of agriculture and our efforts in the continuing negotiations on climate change.

You will have doubtless followed the events at the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen quite closely. Opinions are clearly divided on the question of whether the Conference was a “disaster” or whether it represented a small, but perhaps even significant step forward. Regardless, we can all agree that much remains to be done.

The Statement

As you may know, the Global Crop Diversity Trust coordinated the drafting and release of a *Statement on Food Security and Climate Change*. The Statement marked the first occasion, we believe, in which leaders in the agricultural world together with prominent biological scientists have spoken out on the challenges agriculture faces due to climate change, and for the need to ensure that we get agriculture ready to adapt. The need for crops to adapt to climate change must now be a greater priority than ever following the failure of Copenhagen to set legally binding controls on emissions. Climate change is clearly coming.

The Statement was widely distributed to media prior to Copenhagen and to delegates in Copenhagen. Many of you gave media interviews in connection with the Statement. These were covered by *Nature*, the *New York Times*, *Science Oxford Online*, the Australian Broadcasting Corp., and others. *Reuters* did a story on it that was subsequently published in hundreds of newspapers.

What Happened in Copenhagen?

The Copenhagen Conference was divided into two main negotiating groups, one on mitigation and one on adaptation, the latter of which was further sub-divided into another dozen groups.

“Agriculture” has never been a major or visible part of the climate change negotiations. In Copenhagen, this was evident. There was simply no coherent text on the negotiating table related to agriculture. Indeed it was mentioned only occasionally and only indirectly. Even this text was heavily “bracketed” meaning that countries had not agreed on the wording. My conclusion was that most delegates had not given agriculture much thought, or had mistakenly assumed that crops would somehow take care of themselves. It is possible that internal politics were also at work in many national delegations, as few individuals from agriculture ministries were present.

Ironically, just two weeks earlier Heads of State and Government at the FAO World Summit on Food Security declared that:

Climate change poses additional severe risks to food security and the agriculture sector.... Any recipe for confronting the challenges of climate change must allow for mitigation options and a firm commitment to the adaptation of agriculture, including through conservation and

sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture.

Inserting agriculture into the negotiations, however, proved to be difficult politically and logistically. Politically, some delegations resisted, concerned that this “new” issue could upset the delicate balance that had been “achieved” in the draft text. Others feared agriculture’s inclusion might force the funding pie to be divided into smaller pieces. Logistically, the conference was huge (40,000+ registrations). Most negotiating sessions were held behind closed doors. It was very difficult to identify and talk to the delegates that might be in a position to champion the interests of agriculture.

Despite these difficulties, our situation improved *substantially* as the days passed. While imperfect, the final draft from the Working Group dealing with adaptation explicitly acknowledged the need to “improve the efficiency and productivity of agricultural systems in a sustainable manner and...support adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change...” We could live with that.

The draft also requested the Convention’s Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) to develop a program of work on agriculture.

As you know, the negotiations on mitigation – specifically emissions – broke down. As a result, delegates were forced to salvage the Conference by adopting a minimalist agreement. This agreement, the Copenhagen Accord, is very general in its wording. The only “sector” mentioned specifically is forestry. The word “agriculture” does not appear. The concrete gains made in the Working Group, were thus lost in the Plenary and in the final text of the Copenhagen Accord.

The Copenhagen Accord does, however, contain strong language about adaptation in general. It furthermore states that developed countries agree to “provide adequate, predictable and sustainable financial resources, technology and capacity–building to support the implementation of adaptation action in developing countries.” It’s not all we wished for, but it’s not a defeat.

What’s Next?

The Conference of Parties to the Convention on Climate Change will next meet in Mexico in December. Many countries will be pushing to conclude a legally binding agreement there, as they failed to achieve this in Copenhagen. Numerous preparatory meetings will be held beforehand. Several countries, for instance, have proposed multiple meetings of the Working Groups (including the one on adaptation) prior to December. Will this happen? When? Where? We don’t know.

There will definitely be a meeting of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) in Mexico in June. This meeting is shaping up to be a critical one, as it may well initiate discussions on a program for agriculture and climate change. This is important, because it will strongly influence whether a future legally binding agreement includes agriculture. We would hope that a final agreement would give considerable priority to the necessity of action to adapt crops to climate change. And, we would hope it might also acknowledge that agriculture can play a positive role in mitigation.

What is Our Goal?

Broadly speaking, I would suggest that our common goal should be to ensure that agriculture’s adaptation to climate change is formally recognized as a legitimate and key component of any new legally binding agreement under the Convention. This was the central element in the *Statement*.

More specifically, Parties should commit to engaging in and supporting activities to help agriculture adapt. While adaptation activities are sometimes seen as inherently national-based, it is essential to recognize that regional and *global* efforts will be required. (The conservation, distribution and use of crop diversity, for example, cannot exclusively be done at the national level. No country has the full range of diversity necessary for ensuring crop adaptation.) Parties’ support for such work should be recognized as meeting a portion of their obligations under the Convention.

While agriculture is a source of greenhouse emissions, it should be understood that inefficient, unproductive and unsustainable practices are the real culprit. Improvements in this regard can bolster mitigation efforts. Plant breeding for greater nitrogen use efficiency, for more carbon sequestration capacity, or even to reduce cooking times of foods such as rice, can significantly reduce emissions. A good agreement will encourage such efforts.

What is Our Role?

The Trust will be present both for the SBSTA meeting in Germany and the Conference of Parties in Mexico. We will work with delegations, helping to improve understanding and craft elements for consideration in the negotiations. This alone will not be enough.

Most delegations will arrive at the upcoming round of negotiations with their positions already set. It is important, therefore, that the agricultural community (you!) engage your own country's officials beforehand. You might speak with the actual delegates. Or try to get agricultural leaders more involved. Further contacts with the media would also be useful.

If you would like our assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us. We can provide you with background documents, talking points and even draft text that could be considered.

We all know the stakes are high. If agriculture were appropriately recognized in the next climate change agreement, this would act as a tremendous catalyst for action – just what we need! But if it is not, I fear that attention will shift, funding will erode, and we will find it more and more difficult to undertake the work we know is essential to ensuring food security and adapting to climate change.

If crops don't adapt to climate change neither will agriculture. And if agriculture doesn't adapt successfully, neither will humanity. Our goal and our role must be to make this clear.

The Global Crop Diversity Trust is working to promote the conservation and availability of crop diversity, in perpetuity. We are supporting the Svalbard Global Seed Vault and programs to screen genebank collections for traits needed for climate change adaptation. We are promoting information systems to improve access. And we are developing initiatives to collect, conserve and use crop wild relatives, a rich source of traits for extreme adaptation. We invite you to support this work, and to partner with us in Germany, Mexico, and beyond to "help agriculture get ready."

Sincerely,

Cary Fowler, Ph.D.
Executive Director

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." – Charles Darwin