



Speech by

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President of the Republic

on the occasion

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Your Royal Highness,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is such a pleasure to be here in Stockholm and to be part of this important initiative. The Food Forever Initiative's primary objective is to raise awareness for the importance and urgency of conserving and using agricultural biodiversity and to advocate for concrete actions and ideas to support the implementation of SDG Target 2.5.

I would like at the outset to extend my sincere and deep appreciation Dr Gunhild Stordalen and Professor Johan Rockstrom for their kind invitation and to the warm hospitality extended to me and to my delegation since our arrival in this magnificent city of Stockholm.

I would also like to recognize Dr. Marie Haga and her staff for their energy and for the commitment they are showing to this noble cause.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In September 2015, as part of its agenda for the next 15 years, the UN adopted a set of Sustainable Development Goals.

They are the most sweeping, ambitious program ever undertaken by a global organization.

SGD 2 targets ending hunger, achieve food security and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and those in vulnerable situations.

Target 2.5 goes further and points to a very important issue that *‘by 2020, the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants, farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at national, regional and international levels, and ensure access to and fair resources and associated traditional knowledge as internationally agreed’.*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Food is culture and food preferences are an integral part of cultural identity. In short, food is who we are, 3 times a day for the fortunate few in a world where over 800 million people go to bed hungry everyday.

Humans depend on plant diversity, both wild and cultivated, and is the result of years of selection of crop varieties. It is a critical resource not only to address sustainable agriculture, but for all of our ecosystemic needs.

Increasing the sustainable use of agricultural biodiversity in production and consumption systems will be an important part of the solution to the challenge of meeting future food and nutrition security.

Yet we are pushing Nature’s life-support systems very far and they are struggling to cope with our relentless demand.

If we do not work with Nature's system, Nature will fail to be the durable, continuously sustaining force that she has always been.

It is only by safeguarding Nature's resilience that we can hope to have a resilient form of food production and ensure food security in the long term.

In 2005, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment identified five major direct drivers of biodiversity loss and ecosystem service changes.

They include habitat change, climate change, invasive alien species, overexploitation, and pollution.

Unfortunately, the loss of crop genetic resources is already happening and may lead to the loss of options for improving agriculture.

Whilst agriculture and food production are complex, they operate together to deliver those increased yields to meet society's multiple needs, so the question we need to ask ourselves is this - Are we creating a more sustainable approach to agriculture that is recognizing the social and economic parameters, which are likely to impact feeding the world with a global population rapidly heading for nine billion?

This is a growing problem at the global scale as yields for staple food crops are declining. They have dropped from 3% in the 1960's to 1% today - and for the first time, that rate is less than the rate of population growth. The world has to find the means of feeding over 200.000 new mouths everyday.

This situation I fear, will only become more volatile as we suffer yet more natural disasters.

With an estimated one billion people – one seventh of the world’s population to feed, there is also another billion suffering from “hidden hunger”.

It was comforting to note that the 2016 World Food Prize went to those scientists who developed and implemented, through biofortification and breeding, critical vitamins and micronutrients into staple crops, thereby dramatically reducing “hidden hunger” for millions.

But how do we ensure a “sustainable food production” system? For me, it has to be a form of agriculture that does not exceed the carrying capacity of its local ecosystem.

It is a form of agriculture that is inclusive of the diversity of crops.

Diversity is what provides resilience in farming systems.

One local wheat variety collected in Turkey in 1948—initially of little interest, as it was tall with a thin stem and susceptible to leaf rust and cold weather—was later found to be resistant to several other pathogens including stripe rust.

When stripe rust became a problem in Northwestern USA, this little known variety was included in major wheat breeding programs.

The genetic diversity in landraces used in traditional agricultural production systems constitutes an important element for the livelihood strategies of farmers and confers resilience to agricultural production systems.

It is important for us to ensure that this diversity is maintained in such production systems for evolutionary adaptation to environment changes.

This brings to another important point – how do we bring the Neglected and Underutilized plant species - NUS into the mainstream?

They are also known to play an important role in food security, nutrition, health, income generation and cultural practices. Underutilized plant species are also cultivated and used drawing on indigenous local knowledge.

They are not well represented in *ex situ* genebanks and are characterized by poor or inexistent local seed supply system and which renders them inaccessible.

NUS, unfortunately, represent less than 20% of all accessions held in germplasm collections and are also at risk of cultural and genetic erosion.

Conserving these species is not conservation for conservation sake. It is conservation for today, tomorrow and for hundreds of years from now.

As we have closed the International Year of the Pulses, the humble lentil is one such good example. The pioneering work of Prof. Vandenberg who is reported to be the ‘Godfather of lentil breeding’ must be commended in as much as he managed to bring in the traits of the tough wild relatives growing in their centre of origin – the Middle East into those of cultivated lentils. The results have been staggering for Canada. The country is now a leading exporter in this commodity when lentils hardly grew there in the 1970’s and ensuring food security for millions of

people across the world.

What are we doing in Mauritius? a small country but part of a biodiversity hotspot. Mauritius forms part of the SADC Plant genetic resources programme and has established a National genebank to conserve Plant Genetic Resources. It currently holds 517 accessions.

A duplicate of the entire collection is now housed at the SADC regional database in Zambia. This approach is extremely important and avoids any risks of losing the collection. Why not have a third collection stored at the Svalbard?

Mauritius is also concluding an EU-ACP project, led by Bioversity with a view to ensure the conservation of genetic resources of crop wild relatives native to the country and develop a national strategy action plan for their conservation and use.

This project is allowing Mauritius to identify and collect priority CWR that are missing from the ex-situ collection before they disappear in the wild and also to conserve them in situ.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Agrobiodiversity Target 2.5 in the UN SDGs is ambitious but the global community has committed to safeguarding existing biodiversity by 2020.

The proposed indicators to monitor progress in the achievement of the target 2.5 rightly focus on the efforts to conserve genetic

diversity in ex situ facilities and reducing the extinction risks of local breeds, as they are easy to measure.

However, there is also a need to ensure that the diversity is also maintained in situ.

This is an area where there is a call for the expansion and development of a form of agrobiodiversity index that encompasses different aspects of conservation and use linked to our food systems – hence a complementary approach for both *ex situ* and *in situ* conservation strategies.

The Food Forever Initiative is a campaign to help the global community implement this important decision. Food Forever wants to tell to the world's decision makers how fundamentally important agrobiodiversity is for humankind – whether these decision makers come from governments, private sector or civil society.

We are gathering a group of Champions and Partner organizations to raise awareness and stimulate action.

We are calling for action for a long-term cause that is actually attainable. What we are embarking on is not scientifically difficult, it is not politically controversial and it can be done with remarkably little money.

It has to be done in the next few years. Otherwise it is too late.

Food Forever is providing a platform to all those who are as passionate as I am about the sustainability and resilience of our food systems.

If we are serious about feeding a growing world population with sufficient nutritious food in times of climate change, we have

no other choice but to build on the biodiversity that nature and earlier generations have given to us.

Food Forever is still very young and will evolve gradually – hopefully ending up as a major movement.

We are grateful to be able to launch the initiative here at the EAT Stockholm Food Forum.

We are looking forward to future cooperation with EAT, as well as many other partners in the room.

We invite you all to join us. The more diverse the partners, the more effect we will have.

For change to happen we must act as one, from the farmers growing diverse crops, to the breeders using diversity to develop resilient crops, to the retailers providing more options on their shelves, to the consumers demanding more diverse, nutritious, sustainable foods.

By joining Food Forever, you contribute to securing the basis for food and nutritional security of all future generations.

The time for action is now.

I thank you for your attention.