Official Recommendation Letter n°2012-3

Assessment and improvement of farmers’ technical and traditional knowledge regarding coconut biology in order to increase farmers’ autonomy for production of good planting material.

From 8th to 10th July 2012, the International Coconut Genetic Resources Network (COGENT) organized its 16th Steering Committee Meeting at Cochin, India. The Steering Committee and representatives from various stakeholders of the global coconut sector attending the meeting have endorsed the following international recommendation.

Considering that:

- Despite the enormous potential of the crop, coconut farmers often scrape a living below the poverty line. About 96% of the 10 million farmers, who collectively grow coconuts on 12 million hectares worldwide, are smallholders tending less than four hectares.
- The coconut industry is facing an important revival and a diversification of coconut products. In the future, some traditional varieties presently disappearing could be vital for developing new products and markets, and for improving farmers’ livelihoods.
- Farmers’ technical knowledge regarding the coconut reproductive system and the use of genetic markers such as germinating sprout colour is a key factor for breeding purposes.
- Both traditional and technical knowledge of farmers and other stakeholders regarding coconut breeding and its reproductive system are insufficiently assessed at the global level. But this technical knowledge certainly needs to be improved. For instance, in French Polynesia, at least 80% of farmers do not know that each coconut palm has both female and male flowers.
- Men and women farmers, private enterprise, members of NGOs and CBOs can easily be trained to produce good planting material autonomously.

COGENT recommends:

- Decision-makers at the local, national and international levels to adopt effective portfolios of strategies and gender-sensitive guidelines for conservation and sustainable use of coconut genetic resources to meet the needs of men and women stakeholders, and especially to ensure both effective conservation and availability of good planting material for replanting programmes.
• National Agricultural Services and breeders to allow farmers a primary role in making their own varietal choices, and consider advising against farmers growing only a single coconut variety, be it Tall, Hybrid, Dwarf or whatever.

• Seed-nut producers and agricultural services to provide farmers, at the national level, a range of at least six different coconut varieties, including Talls, hybrids, Dwarfs and eventually composite varieties; and to explain to farmers the specificity of each variety regarding environmental adaptation and cultural practices. Most of farmers will choose to plant more than one variety.

• Encouraging local stakeholders (men and women farmers, private enterprise, NGOs and CBOs) to become more involved in supplying quality germplasm, and to teach farmers and other stakeholders how to autonomously produce quality seedlings of hybrids and other varieties, using the Polymotu concept or any other adapted method.

• Assessing farmers’ knowledge regarding the reproductive biology of the coconut palm and the use of genetic markers such as sprout colour for breeding purposes. This study should be conducted by 1) drafting a standard gender-sensitive questionnaire by ethno-biologists and geneticists, 2) training local researchers on implementing the survey, and 3) interviewing at least 100 farmers in at least 20 countries of the 39 COGENT member countries.

• Developing a communication strategy to increase farmers’ knowledge regarding coconut reproductive biology and breeding methods, including training tools, video guidelines, media communication, and an approach for marketing of genetic resources.

• Conducting a similar survey with the same questionnaire five years after launching this process, in order to assess progress regarding the farmers’ knowledge

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