

The Bellagio Brief

Members of civil society, government, inter-governmental organizations, researchers, livestock keepers and the private sector from 17 countries met in Bellagio, Italy, from 27 March to 2 April 2006, to discuss issues related to livestock biodiversity, indigenous knowledge and intellectual property rights.

Their discussions highlighted the following issues:

The livelihoods of pastoralists and smallholder farmers are threatened by the progressive loss of grazing land for their animals, limitations to mobility, inadequate or inappropriate government policies, and lack of animal health and other services. These developments are also causing the progressive loss of the livestock breeds and species that provide rural livelihoods and life-style options.

Alarmingly, the patenting of breeding processes and individual genes may restrict the rights of the communities and individuals to breed, manage and use their livestock as they choose, thus posing a threat to the viability and continued development of the breeds. For example, a [broad patent claim](#) recently filed by Monsanto at the World Intellectual Property Organisation would, if approved, restrict the rights of breeders to use commonly practised breeding techniques for pigs.

Livestock keepers have, for thousands of years, been breeding and improving their own stock. Through this process they have created a wide range of livestock breeds that are adapted to their specific environments. These diverse breeds are the result of deliberate, collective action on the part of livestock keepers to develop a type of animal that matches their economic, social, cultural, ecological and food security requirements and optimizes the use of the resources available to them. Breeds are not only a group of animals with specific genetic characteristics; they are also important cultural heritage and reflect the rich body of knowledge of the communities that developed them.

These locally developed breeds are adapted to harsh environments: droughts, diseases, poor quality feed and fodder. They thus represent an important source of genetic diversity for the future. Extinction of breeds endangers not only the livelihoods of their keepers, but also the ability of humanity as a whole to adapt to constant ecological and economic changes.

Livestock keepers' inherent rights to continue to use and develop their own breeding stock and breeding practices should be acknowledged. National governments must recognize these rights, acknowledge livestock keepers' contribution to national economies, and adapt their policies and legal frameworks accordingly. This is particularly important to pre-empt attempts to use the intellectual property system to obtain control over animal resources that are an important component of the world's food supply.

Civil Society and others who care should join the efforts of livestock keepers to get their rights formally recognized.

The workshop was organized by the League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development (www.pastoralpeoples.org) and supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, Misereor and Swedbio.