



‘Struggles for life: agriculture, food, biodiversity’

An introduction to GRAIN and its work

What is GRAIN?

GRAIN is a small international non-profit organisation that works to:

- support farmers and movements in their struggles against privatisation and corporate control in the area of food, biodiversity and agriculture
- work for true community controlled and biodiversity based alternatives.

Agricultural biodiversity

Diversity is key to sustainable food and farming systems. For thousands of years, local communities have developed an incredible wealth of seeds and breeds, farming systems and cultural traditions.

This is not just a precious heritage but fundamental for food, fuel, shelter, medicine and livelihoods. Yet this biodiversity is being monopolised and destroyed by an increasingly globalised industrial food production and trade system, and by the corporations behind it. In an era of global food crisis our struggle, more than ever, is one for truly sustainable food and farming systems based on peoples' control over their own livelihoods.

“food and farming based on peoples' control over their own livelihoods”

Global and local

A genuinely international group with 15 staff on five continents, GRAIN works at all levels – global, regional, national and local – with an active presence in Africa, Asia and Latin America. While we are an independent

“a small group with a big agenda”

organisation, as a small group with a big agenda we work very much in collaboration with others – from farmers' movements to NGOs – whilst always respecting their autonomy. We offer groundbreaking independent research and analysis, information exchange and direct support. Our unique setup allows us

to interpret global trends with local movements, but also to amplify in the global debate the priorities and concerns of those on the ground.

The organisation is funded by grants from non-governmental organisations as well as a few government sources, and governed by a rotating board of people active in similar work who share responsibility for GRAIN in their personal capacities.

GRAIN aims to:

- stimulate public awareness about the importance of biodiversity for society, and about developments that threaten this diversity
- increase knowledge and understanding of structural causes behind the destruction of biological diversity
- promote activities and policies that lead to a more equitable and sustainable conservation and use of biodiversity at all levels
- support social movements and public interest groups concerned about biodiversity

Our history

Seed diversity – a growing concern

GRAIN's work goes back to the early 1980s as a key player in the growing network of activists concerned over the dramatic erosion of genetic diversity in agriculture. In the early years our work was mainly devoted to raising public awareness about the threat of genetic erosion and building citizens' networks to support actions and strategies to counter the problem. In 1990 GRAIN was legally established as a non-profit foundation.

The root causes of declining biodiversity in agriculture were clear to us from the start: an unsustainable industrial agricultural development model that pushed new seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides into the farmers' fields; a creeping bias towards private sector control of the food supply; and unfair policy regimes that force farmers, indeed countries, to become captive clients of transnational corporations. As the Green Revolution of the 1960s gave way to the biotechnology revolution in the 1980s and agribusiness companies started pushing for patent rights over new crops, a diplomatic war over who controls the basis of the food supply broke out at the United Nations and the 'seeds issue' was born. GRAIN played an important role in raising awareness and influencing the debate.



In the 1990s, this growing awareness of the importance and gross mismanagement of seed diversity gave way to a broader-based realisation that biodiversity important for many of our needs was being lost, and that giant drug and chemical companies were gaining exclusive control over it. Despite a new UN global treaty to conserve and share the benefits of biodiversity, international trade negotiations were underway which would further strengthen corporate control over farmers' seeds. The 'seeds war' was actually getting worse. This galvanised a huge new movement of broad political awareness and increasing social activism to fight the corporate agenda around seeds and the future of farming, and to put peoples' needs and rights first.

Hitting the ground – GRAIN decentralises

The late 1990s was an important turning point for GRAIN. We needed to anchor our work more in the real agricultural alternatives being developed on the ground. Across the world and under control of local communities, many groups were recuperating local seeds and traditional knowledge and building sustainable, biodiversity-based food systems and markets, while turning their backs on the laboratory-developed 'solutions' and top-down development programmes that had led them and others into trouble.

In a strong organisational shift, GRAIN started a decentralisation and regionalisation process that would allow us to work more closely and directly with partners in the South. We expanded our staff pool, transformed our governing body and reoriented our programme, whilst retaining our strong research and information capacities.. By the turn of the century GRAIN had changed from a mostly Europe-based information and lobby group, into a dynamic, unique and truly international collective that was linking and connecting local realities and global developments and supporting social movements in the process.

“connecting local realities and global developments”

- **What GRAIN is:** a small, decentralised and autonomous international organisation (non governmental, non profit); collectively run and diverse within; strong political analysis, low-key profile
- **What GRAIN is not:** a network, a funding agency or a membership group; representative of anyone

Who we are

GRAIN is a small, cohesive group with an ambitious programme. People are often surprised to learn how few we are, as year on year we produce a wide range of information materials and cutting-edge analyses, and link in with many groups and movements across the globe.

Our team is composed of 12 programme and three finance and administration staff. We have two programme staff in each region of the South – Africa, Asia and Latin America – working closely with local groups. They are supported by three global programme staff, plus an information team that takes care of our publications and outreach.

“We have programme staff in each region of the South”

More than half our staff are women and, together, we represent almost a dozen nationalities. Rich in this diversity, GRAIN functions as a collective, with a horizontal management system and participatory methods of decision-making, evaluation and planning.

“GRAIN’s information outputs are prodigious: for a small team scattered internationally, the information they provide to those who defend biodiversity is considerable and it is widely used.”

External evaluation of GRAIN, 2007

How we work

GRAIN’s work can be largely divided into two fields: information and movement building.

Information

We are highly specialised at monitoring and analysing trends that affect farmers’ and rural communities’ control over agricultural biodiversity. Many of these – for example genetic engineering or seed patenting regimes – are global, though they play out differently at national and regional levels. Other trends emerge from the grassroots, national or regional levels – such as initiatives to prevent genetic contamination from GM crops – and we help facilitate learning from them and reinforcing them through international work.

GRAIN’s publications

- **Seedling:** GRAIN’s quarterly magazine and flagship publication. Each issue contains an editorial, 3-4 articles, book reviews, interviews and much more. *Seedling* is written both by GRAIN staff and outside collaborators.
- **Against the grain:** a series of short opinion pieces on recent trends and developments in the issues that GRAIN works on. Each one focuses on a specific and timely topic.
- **Briefings:** substantial research reports, providing in-depth background information and analysis on a given topic. GRAIN briefings are usually written by GRAIN staff, often in collaboration with other organisations or individuals.
- **Biodiversidad:** a quarterly magazine, produced jointly by GRAIN and a coalition of Latin American civil society organisations. [in Spanish]
- **Semences de la biodiversité:** a monthly bulletin providing news & analysis on agricultural biodiversity relevant to Francophone Africa. Each issue focuses on one subject. [in French]



“The ‘Against the Grain’ on Iraq’s new patent law was excellent. It was translated and published in a major national newspaper. It won awards.”

Iranian food sovereignty activist

GRAIN is oriented toward the grassroots

"What local NGOs do with GRAIN's information outputs is 'translate' them into local realities to make educational, training and campaign materials appropriate to their particular and specific realities. A very equitable and equitable relationship has been developed for all of these collaborative efforts: there is no sense of GRAIN trying to dominate in any way."

External evaluation of GRAIN, 2007

Examples of GRAIN's collaborative efforts

<p>Biodiversidad (since 1997)</p>	<p>Spanish-language quarterly magazine on biodiversity, culture and livelihoods, oriented towards Latin America. Launched by GRAIN over 10 years ago together with REDES (Friends of the Earth Uruguay), it is now collectively produced with six groups in the region, including Via Campesina Seeds Campaign (Chile), Acción Ecológica (Ecuador), Grupo Semillas (Colombia), ETC Group (Mexico), Red de Coordinación en Biodiversidad (Costa Rica) and Acción por la Biodiversidad (Argentina)</p>
<p>bilaterals.org (since 2004)</p>	<p>An open-publishing website to share information and stimulate cooperation against bilateral trade and investment agreements. Jointly launched and maintained by GRAIN, Ibon Foundation (Philippines), Asia Pacific Research Network, Global Justice Ecology Project, GATT Watchdog (New Zealand) and XminusY (Netherlands).</p>
<p>The Growing Diversity Project (2000-2003)</p>	<p>A project to share and document experiences on the local management of agricultural biodiversity, involving groups from across the world from farmers and hunters to fisherfolk and indigenous people, over 80 case studies, and several regional and international workshops. Jointly organised by GRAIN, Bread for the World (Germany), Crocevia (Italy) and the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Sweden)</p>
<p>The Nyeleni Forum on Food Sovereignty (2007)</p>	<p>Organised by a coalition of social movements involving farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, environmentalists and indigenous peoples, this forum brought over 500 people together in Mali to articulate and plan global action around food sovereignty. GRAIN participated in the preparation and organisation of this event.</p>
<p>Fighting FTAs (2008)</p>	<p>"<i>Fighting FTAs: the growing resistance to bilateral free trade and investment agreements</i>" is a collaborative publication and website released by bilaterals.org, BIOTHAI (Thailand) and GRAIN in February 2008. It documents the impact of such agreements and some of the struggles being waged against them by social movements.</p>



Our programme

GRAIN's current three-year programme is called *Struggles for life: supporting people's movements on agriculture, food and biodiversity*. It builds on our existing experience and strengths while pushing us to develop and widen our work further. Through *Struggles*, we aim to:

- broaden GRAIN's perspective from agricultural biodiversity per se to food systems at large, and from farmer control over seeds to a wider setting of social power relations (e.g. relating to labour, gender, finance, markets);
- engage in wider partnerships, from our past emphasis on working with farmers and NGOs to increase and develop more meaningful working relations with and between more social groups: fisherfolk, workers, indigenous peoples, healers, women's' movements, independent media activists, etc.;
- adopt a more central focus on the growing influence of corporations and peoples' movements as counterweight and source of meaningful social, political and economic change.



“GRAIN links the dots together so I can see the whole picture.”

European activist, 2007

The *Struggles for life* programme is divided into four areas of work:

1. Biodiversity, corporations and the international food system

This area deals with the increasing corporate control over biodiversity and the international food system. This involves research, information work, capacity sharing and movement-building. It currently includes focused work on food safety standards, the global food crisis, hybrid rice, bird flu, free trade agreements, multilateral agencies setting new rules for biodiversity management, trends in intellectual property affecting farmers' control over biodiversity, and other pressing issues.

2. Communities first: the fight for food sovereignty

Our work to support peoples' movements towards more biodiverse and socially just food and agricultural systems – what is often referred to as 'food sovereignty'. It involves monitoring, research, information work and especially movement-building to support people-centred policies and solutions on the ground. Current activities include focused work on capacity sharing with Via Campesina's Seeds Campaign in Latin America, network building in Asia, Africa and Latin America, sharing experiences with local strategies to confront GM contamination in Mexico and the Philippines, supporting new approaches to seed saving in Africa, involvement in dozens of capacity building initiatives in the regions, and discussing the setting-up of a solidarity fund with others to support farmers' biodiversity initiatives, to mention just a few.

“the fight for food sovereignty”

3. Cross-cutting information work and outreach

More general information activities and outreach functions, including the production of both regular periodicals such as *Seedling*, *Biodiversidad* and *Semences de la Biodiversité*, and occasional publications such as GRAIN's briefings and the *Against the grain* comment series. It also includes GRAIN's website, further development of our multimedia documentation from photo essays to video, and our overall communications and outreach strategies. Translation work is focused on French, Spanish, English, Portuguese and Chinese, but we will also venture into more local languages as the need arises.

4. Programme and organisational development

Building GRAIN's internal resources, learning with partners, monitoring and evaluating our work and programme building. This includes focused activities in terms of staff trainings, exchanges, programme evaluation and planning meetings with our Board and partners, exploring new funding opportunities and further developing GRAIN's management practices. Much of this learning and development is shared or done with partners.



Achievements & challenges

On a day to day level, GRAIN measures its success in terms of unearthing important new trends, coming out with well-documented analyses and developing relationships, learning and tools that are useful for local movements, be they farmers' organisations, civil society groups, unions or activists. We see this not only through the impact of our publications but also in how we provide needed support, inputs and services to different groups and people.

GRAIN reaches policy makers

"GRAIN's reports on hybrid rice have been widely used and cited. For example, Chinese negotiators at the WTO in Geneva quoted this GRAIN publication as their source on the issue."

External evaluation of GRAIN, 2007

In the longer term, we know that our main contribution to the struggle for people-based control over seeds, biodiversity and food systems has to result in empowering people and their organisations. We call this movement building: helping to create a broader understanding of the issues and sharing experiences so that people, through large social movements, can better fight for the changes that they feel are needed.

**"empowering people
and their
organisations"**

GRAIN has significantly contributed to:

- making biodiversity an issue of global public attention and civic activism
- fostering public debate over some of the thorniest issues – such as intellectual property rights, genetic engineering and corporate control over seeds – and creating an understanding that other more sustainable and inclusive alternatives exist, and are being fought for
- stimulating cooperation among different actors to put a stop to the rampant spread of industrial agriculture models and policies and mobilise support for ecological farmer-controlled visions instead
- helping civil society groups understand and keep abreast of the latest threats and developments in the field of corporate control over biodiversity and peoples' knowledge

"GRAIN's outputs are found to be credible, reliable, trustworthy and timely. GRAIN is acknowledged by many as an international leader and opinion maker."

External evaluation of GRAIN, 2007

Despite these very real and important achievements, we do realize that things are not getting better on the ground. Overall, the policy environment for those concerned about agricultural biodiversity and the needs and position of small-scale farmers has worsened during the past decade. On a political level, GRAIN faces a number of challenges as it carries out its work programme:

- **Being linked to social movements:** GRAIN's legitimacy comes from providing relevant support to local groups and movements, be it in the form of good analysis, useful information or strategy ideas and tools. Yet it is not easy to be working at the global level and on the ground at the same time. It is a fine balancing act that makes our work difficult but not impossible.
- **Relevance:** Staying relevant is a constant struggle that requires being on top of what is going on at various levels and judging how GRAIN can make a difference and to whom.
- **Really effecting change:** Because we are so aware of the power problems at the root of the struggle over biodiversity, we are constantly aware that any real solution requires changing power relations. This makes our end goal highly ambitious.

Biodiversity figures right at the centre of today's struggle between the forces of neoliberal globalisation and the popular movement for social justice and environmental sustainability. After all, biodiversity is what we depend upon to feed, clothe, house and heal ourselves, not only today but for many generations yet to come. Difficult as it may be, this struggle has never been more relevant, crucial or worthwhile, and GRAIN is proud to be part of it.



Further information

For more information about GRAIN, our publications, and additional materials on agricultural biodiversity and the international food system please visit our website: www.grain.org.

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