

Introduction speech to FAO Governing Board Meeting, Rome Italy on 11th November 2019

By Evelyne Okoth, from Nyando Kenya

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

I am **Evelyne Okoth**, a wife, a mother and a farmer from a tiny little village in Nyando, Kenya. I am here today on behalf of thousands of farmers from Nyando who have benefited and continue to benefit from plant genetic resources held and conserved in-situ and ex-situ through various project of the treaty's benefit sharing fund. I grew up seeing my parents selecting and conserving certain varieties of crops as a seed for next season. Despite availability of hybrids, they always went for their saved seeds season after season. I thought that we could not afford buying the well packaged hybrid seeds but when I grew up and also thank to this project, I understood why my parents always went for local varieties.

Nyando where I come from is located in Western region of Kenya and has been for the past 15 years ravaged by both extreme cases of droughts and floods and shorter rainy seasons. As a result of these, there have been a rise in new pests and diseases; loss of genetic diversity; lower productivity and food insecurity.

And today I came here to share good news with you!

In 2016, a new project on "Promoting Open Source Seed Systems for Climate Change Adaptation in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania" was introduced in my village by Bioversity International and Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Institute, sponsored by Benefit Sharing Fund of the Food and Agriculture Organization and the European Union. Through this project, we received 163 sorghum and 68 millet accessions from the national gene banks of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Together with partners from breeding programs and the agricultural research institute, we tested these varieties and selected over 14 sorghum and 18 millet varieties that are suitable for our changing climate and related challenges. This has helped us to diversify varieties in our farms and we are now able to produce more food.

We are also grateful to have received various capacity building sessions to enable us select and produce quality seed; as well as conserve and use the diversity of plant genetic resources for food and Agriculture. Thanks to the project we now have a community seed bank where we conserve over 180 varieties of sorghum, 90 varieties of millet, 40 varieties of beans and 15 varieties of local traditional vegetables. Thanks to the seed bank, over 1000 farmers from 8 villages and 2 counties in Western Kenya, that is Kisumu County and Kericho County and allows farmers to access good quality seeds.

Through the project we also had exchange visits with farmers in Uganda where we had a training on Seed business management and Gender Action learning in seed systems to involve more women in seed production and conservation. We as farmers have also come to understand that the international treaty and the Multilateral system of access and benefit sharing does indeed work for the benefit of farmers like me.

Thank you, International Treaty and European Union for selecting and supporting this project, and thank you Bioversity International and your partners for finally understanding and promoting what we prefer, and not what you think we need. Thank you for respecting our right to choose our own seeds and food!

I welcome all of you to Nyando, western Kenya to see and appreciate the good work you have started with us, the transformation that you are bringing in my society, the homesteads whose lives you are positively touching and changing nutritionally and the improved adaptability to the climate change. On behalf of the farmers in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, we say thank you for your endless efforts and time spend with us. And we hope that we are going to work more with all of you, and support your work as primary partners in promoting adoption of these innovations. We hope that more funds will be available to enable scaling up these activities to many other regions.

Thank you all for this opportunity, and always remember, happy farmers builds healthy nations that creates a peaceful world

Thank you again