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Dear Christine,

Thank you for your correspondence to the Foreign Secretary about small farmers buying and selling seeds. I am replying as the Minister for Development and Africa.

I would be grateful if you could publish this response on your website/circulate this response to your supporters.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to our attention. Since your original letter, we have also taken note of the recently published report on the same matter 'Sowing the seeds of poverty: How the World Bank harms poor farmers'.

As you point out, land races and traditional crop varieties are often conserved, exchanged and sold by farmers. These varieties provide important genetic diversity and can be well adapted for local agronomic conditions. However, these traditional varieties are often not well suited to rapidly changing climate conditions and emerging disease threats, and they do not always respond well to increase use of inputs and better agronomy which can drive yield gains. There is also good evidence that modern varieties, either hybrids or open pollinated, where these meet farmer demand and are available, can lead to significant benefits in terms of incomes and food security.

It is important that farmers have access to these modern varieties, as well as traditional varieties. An efficient national agricultural innovation system, an effective seed certification system, aligned with regulated well-functioning seed markets which enable

CAFOD received this letter from the UK government in response to our Fix the Food System campaign. We are pleased that the government has engaged with our campaign and is listening to our concerns. Unfortunately, we do not agree with everything in this letter. Below in red you can see CAFOD's reaction on specific policy points.

This is not accurate. Traditional varieties are highly adaptable, responding to field conditions year by year. It can take up to 10 years to develop a 'drought tolerant' variety in a commercial breeding context.

We should not be aiming for increased use of inputs: they can be environmentally damaging, contribute to climate change and smallholder farmers often cannot afford them.

This is not accurate. Traditional varieties are highly responsive to better agronomic methods, particularly soil quality management.

CAFOD's report shows that modern varieties often do not meet farmer demand. In particular, they rarely meet the priorities of women farmers.

CAFOD's report shows that commercial seeds are often not available, and even when they are, they are too expensive for many farmers.

farmers to select new seed varieties which meet their demand is essential to meet the challenges agriculture faces in many developing countries. We are supporting this longer-term goal to do both, boost food security, incomes, and climate adaptation and resilience, thereby supporting the Sustainable Development Goals.

For example, through our work through with the CGIAR breeding programmes, we are supporting the development and release of seeds in partnership with and through national partners, including government and the private sector. The aim of the CGIAR is always to reach as many people as possible and to increase both the rate of varietal turn over and genetic gain in farmers' fields (gain not only expressed as yield gain, but in terms of farmer expressed demand, and other favourable traits; micronutrient concentration and climate resilience for example).

Following on from its role as a lead co-negotiator at the United Nations, the UK has also been fully supportive of the CFS Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and food Systems (RAI) and their implementation. These were agreed in 2014 between governments, private sector, civil society organisations, the UN, development banks and the research community. Principle 7.ii specifically recognises the contributions of farmers, especially smallholders in all regions of the world, particularly those in centres of origin and diversity, in conserving, improving, and making available genetic resources, including seeds; and, subject to national law and in accordance with applicable international treaties, respecting their rights, to save, use, exchange, and sell these resources, and recognizing the interests of breeders.

We have been in touch with the World Bank regarding your specific concerns. They have confirmed that they do not have a policy in place that restricts farmers in choosing their seeds. The Bank advocates the use of good quality seeds as part of our overall approach to productivity and climate resilience.

World Bank operations are designed at country level, in support of government priorities and plans and in consultation with other stakeholders. We would encourage you or your local partners to get involved in these consultations to help shape future bank operations.

FCDO Officials are available, as always, to discuss your campaign and the evidence behind the report in more detail if helpful.

With warmer regards to you,
Joan evs
Andrew

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We agree that systems that enable farmers to access seeds that meet their needs are essential. But seed certification laws often make it impossible for farmers to access traditional or local varieties. That's why we're calling for support for farmer-led seed systems.

Where national law and international treaties are in conflict, we call on governments to uphold the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. This Treaty should also take precedence over UPOV₉₁ and demands in trade agreements for convergence on intellectual property rules.

They may not have a specific stated policy but the impact of their actions and the conditions on their loans has the effect of restricting farmers' choices.