

## **VALUING AND PROMOTING SMALLHOLDER AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES: THE APPROACH OF THE PLEC PROJECT**

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In a world where agricultural production is increasingly characterized by a very limited number of crops produced in a very limited number of ways, rural smallholders are among the few social groups that still produce diversity in agricultural landscapes. The biological richness of small farmers' landholdings have drawn experts to collect crop germplasm and suggest actions for conserving these resources of global value. In this paper we argue that for a majority of poor rural families the most important resource is their complex and diverse resource use systems which are more than just a sum of their products. Diverse systems have a multiplicity of ecological and economic functions; the biodiversity they contain frequently has a utility or meaning beyond the specific uses of its component parts.

We focus on examples of how locally-developed management systems allow farmers in economically marginalized areas to cope with abrupt and transformative changes in their physical, biological and socio-economic environments. We present specific examples of highly dynamic agriculture, agroforestry, forest management and local conservation practices collected from PLEC demonstration sites established in the landholdings of small farmers. We discuss how farmers using these diverse systems responded to major changes including shifts in market opportunities and agricultural policies, as well as problems such as new crop diseases, and catastrophic alterations in the physical landscape.

We also discuss the issue of how to promote productive and flexible resource use systems that result in a diversity of environments in which agrobiodiversity and other biological resources are cultivated, managed and conserved. We argue that the complexity of such systems is poorly understood by most agronomists and that exchanges between agronomists and farmers rarely take advantage of the full range of farmer expertise. We describe PLEC demonstration activities where farmers (expert farmers) who have developed and successfully used diverse systems demonstrate these documented and tested technologies. Based on PLEC experience we argue that it is critical for programs seeking to protect or conserve diversity in rural smallholder agriculture to identify "expert farmers" as the most creative generators as well as potentially the most capable teachers of these complex systems of managing plants, animals, and ecological interactions.