

THE DILEMMA OF AFRICAN AGROBIODIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF FOOD INSECURITY IN PROMOTING CONSERVATION

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Significant concern is being focused on the erosion of agricultural biodiversity resources which undergird important aspects of global food supply. 'Genetic erosion' of important agricultural crop varieties in areas known to be centers of diversity is thought to increase risks to global food security, through the loss of the genetic material needed to facilitate adaptation to changing problems of climate, pests, and disease. While certain processes of genetic erosion are thought to be underway in a fairly pervasive manner across important agricultural landscapes, the intersection of these processes with local cultural and political ecology can actually produce a variety of circumstances. With evidence from highland Ethiopia, this paper suggests that the processes thought to be broadly responsible for genetic erosion--processes responsible for increasing food *insecurity* among small-scale agriculturalists--are instead having the reverse effect of conserving agricultural biodiversity by continuing risk-averse behavior. The dilemma that emerges then pits food aid, extension services, and agricultural development *against* the conservation of agricultural biodiversity, in that the successful promotion of the former can have the effect of eroding the latter. International efforts to promote the conservation of crop genetic diversity need to carefully consider the outcomes of the intersection between local cultural and political ecology with broad processes thought to be responsible for significant genetic erosion, in order to realize important constraints and opportunities for conservation of agricultural biodiversity.