

Smallholder Farmers, Agrodiversity, and Climate Change

Sponsor: UNU

The course was conducted by Dr. Miguel Pinedo-Vasquez, Director of International Programs at the Center for Environmental Research at Columbia University. The course addressed three aspects of the relationship of smallholder farmers to climate change: 1) the effects that climate change is likely to have on smallholder farmers; 2) Agrodiversity as a tool that smallholder farmers have to deal with climate change; and 3) the effects that programmes to mitigate and/or adapt to climate change might have on smallholders.

The focus of the course was on “Agrodiversity”, the keystone of the UNU’s programme of People, Land and Environmental Change (PLEC). It was about a methodological approach that integrated biological, social, and institutional components, as a particularly useful way to understand and achieve the flexibility and resilience that farmers needed to successfully respond to climate change.

Dr. Pinedo-Vasquez explained that despite the great variation that existed among small farmers, the common difficulties that beset most farming households included poverty, political powerlessness, and cultural marginalization. Small farmers tended to farm lands that were agriculturally marginal: often sloping, not irrigated, or prone to flooding. Smallholders were frequently members of ethnic or linguistic minorities and had poor access to communication, to agricultural services, as well as to credit, any formal insurance or disaster relief benefits, and extension services.

Specific ways were explained of assessing, testing, and promoting Agrodiversity among smallholder farmers, as well as on PLEC-developed expert farmer and demonstration approaches. Case studies were presented to illustrate the concepts, methods and technologies using a variety of materials and approaches. Some projects and programmes were reviewed in terms of how they respond to calls to mitigate and adapt to climate change and how these specifically affect smallholder farmers. The case studies addressed: more effective use and conservation of forests; programmes for the greening of wastelands; the elimination of the use of fire in agriculture and animal husbandry, and projects for planting and increased use of biofuels.