



The policy context of Crop Wild Relatives

Addressing policy gaps to ensure sustainable food systems

Introduction

Amid growing climate change and food insecurity pressures, the wild relatives of cultivated crops could offer genetic potential to breed varieties that can adapt and prosper under these evolving conditions. Despite this potential, current agricultural policies place limited explicit focus on Crop Wild Relatives (CWRs), risking missed opportunities to build more resilient agri-food systems.



Objectives

Building on the need to unlock the full potential of Crop Wild Relatives (CWRs) for resilient agriculture, the COUSIN Project examines how existing European and international frameworks address their conservation and use. While many of these frameworks contain elements that can support CWRs, they are not yet a distinct focus. To respond to this, COUSIN combines policy-related insights from peer-reviewed literature and European and international projects to provide

an evidence-informed basis for strengthening policy frameworks relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of CWRs. This approach identifies priority policy themes and conservation areas, along with opportunities to embed both in situ and ex situ measures into agricultural and biodiversity strategies, with the goal of delivering multifaceted benefits.





Results

COUSIN's policy review revealed that while existing frameworks contain supportive elements, they rarely address CWRs directly. Three dimensions emerged. Economically, incentives and market tools are limited, while productivity gains from CWR-derived traits remain untapped. Societally, farmers, rural communities, and indigenous knowledge holders are insufficiently involved in shaping and implementing conservation strategies, along with weak benefit-sharing mechanisms. Environmentally, conservation of wild plant diversity is fragmented and under-resourced, with limited links to agricultural systems and climate goals. These patterns indicate structural gaps that restrict the integration of CWRs into broader agricultural and biodiversity policy agendas.

Recommendations

Implementing the COUSIN Project's findings can unlock the full potential of CWRs by creating synergies between value-driven breeding innovation, community wellbeing, and environmental stewardship. Well-designed financial incentives and new market opportunities can drive their integration into breeding, boosting productivity and reducing external inputs. Engaging rural communities in conservation, ensuring fair benefit-sharing, and safeguarding traditional agricultural knowledge can expand CWR use while fostering cohesion and inclusive societies. Embedding both in situ and ex situ conservation into agricultural and biodiversity policies secures genetic diversity and strengthens farms' capacity to face climate change and food insecurity. Unlocking CWRs through effective policies is an investment in sustainable, resilient agri-food systems.

Further readings

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- Tacconi, F., Waha, K., Ojeda, J. J., & Leith, P. (2022). Drivers and constraints of on-farm diversity. A review. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*, 42(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-021-00736-6>
- Vogt, M. A. B. (2021). Agricultural wilding: rewilding for agricultural landscapes through an increase in wild productive systems. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 284, 112050. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2021.112050>

