



NEWS RELEASE

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Crofters to mark the death of pioneering agricultural scientist Erna Bennett.

Erna Bennett, an Irish scientist whose pioneering work on agricultural biodiversity has contributed to raising awareness of the importance of conserving crofting seed varieties, died earlier this month at the age of 86.

Although she began her career as a genetic scientist, Erna Bennett's work led her to become an outspoken advocate of the rights of farmers to maintain traditional seed varieties.

She worked for the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation throughout the 1970s until her resignation in 1982 because of concerns that the work she had helped to initiate, to conserve the genetic diversity of the world's agriculture, was being undermined by private companies. She feared these firms had infiltrated the UN system and were applying pressure in order to be able to patent and privatise seeds as the source of life.

This is a debate and a campaign that continues to the present day and Bennett's arguments have inspired a generation of researchers and activists, including those working in the crofting counties.

Maria Scholten is a crop researcher and has been working with crofters in Uist who grow the traditional variety of small oats on machair land there.

Maria said: "Erna Bennett was a double pioneer: she was one of the first to see the need to collect and conserve seeds of threatened local varieties. She was also one of the first to observe the tendency of increased commercial privatisation of seeds and genes. She campaigned against the increasing monopolisation in the hands of a few of what once were public goods available to all - seeds - and public services - public plant breeding for all classes of farmers.

"Throughout Scotland in the past – and on the islands still at present – crofters and farmers worked for these public goods by saving seed and making seed available to other farmers. Local varieties and their seeds cannot be seen as an individual, commercial property but were a shared resource, created in and by communities. The increasing privatisation of seeds (most blatantly in patenting)

goes against a mentality and value of community, public service and public goods. Dr. Bennett foresaw this change and spoke out against it."

Maria added that it is only recently that native variety seeds have been collected for conservation in Scotland. Much of the work has focussed on crofting areas which are relatively rich in native varieties. She said: "Although it is difficult to get funding for this work it is important to find out what is left of the native varieties to conserve. We are living through fast changing times for agriculture and the native varieties are a valuable part of Scotland's genetic and cultural heritage."

In Strathpeffer in March of this year the Scottish Crofting Federation will be co-hosting a European forum on agricultural biodiversity. The theme of the forum is 'Celebrating Crofters' Seeds and Breeds' and it will examine how native varieties have helped contribute to sustainable land use, agricultural biodiversity and the high nature value of the crofting counties. It is intended that the life of Erna Bennett, who worked in Scotland in the 1960s and spent her final years here, will be commemorated at the event.

Erna Bennett's 'Celtic connection' is an added reason to celebrate her work in a crofting context as she was an Irishwoman whose writing reveals that she understood the historic struggle between the Irish tenantry and their landlords. Maria Scholten commented: "This must have sharpened her eye for struggles to protect public goods, to protect small holders against private property."

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1. For further details of the life and work of Erna Bennett see:
http://www.geneconserve.pro.br/bio_erna.htm
<http://www.grain.org/article/entries/289-the-summit-to-summit-merry-go-round>
2. For further details of the Let's Liberate Diversity gathering, to be held between 9th and 11th March this year, see: <http://www.liberate-diversity-scotland2012.org/index.html> or contact Carol Anne Stewart on 01599 530005
3. Late last year two young representatives of the Scottish Crofting Federation took part in a protest against tax proposals which European farmers fear will support the privatisation of seeds by multinational corporations. For further details see: http://www.crofting.org/images/uploads/Strasbourg_seeds_demonstration.pdf

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