19 September 2007

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, on behalf of Bioversity International I would like to thank Professor Scarascia Mugnozza and the National Academy of Sciences for having awarded the prestigious St Frances International Prize for the Environment to the organization I am privileged to direct.

Bioversity International has undergone considerable development in the past few years. For more than thirty years we have worked to ensure the conservation of plant genetic resources, work that we continue to support with enthusiasm today because conservation is the basis for all research to improve crops and livestock in order to increase yields. However, our research work has expanded and today covers the entire range of agricultural biodiversity, albeit with a clear focus on people and a clear desire to improve the livelihoods of the poorest people through research into biodiversity. Indeed, people are directly at the heart of all our work.

It has now been six years since we moved our headquarters to Maccarese, and then-President Ciampi officially opened the wonderful building. It is no exaggeration when I say that without Italian support it would have been extremely difficult to have drawn up our research programme and to have obtained the important results with which we are associated.

Bioversity is today considered the largest international organization working on the use and conservation of agricultural biodiversity. For more than thirty years we have been committed to promoting agricultural biodiversity as a strategic resource for sustainable development, not only to improve the size and stability of harvests, but also to deliver a better diet and to improve the incomes of small farmers and other links in the chain of production, all while preserving the natural environment.

In recent years we have increased our commitment in the realm of health and nutrition, which is important in developed and developing countries alike.

Among the problems the world today faces is hidden hunger, which is as much of a challenge in industrialized countries as it in those still in the process of developing. Around two billion people – most of them women and children – suffer a lack of vitamin A, iron, zinc or one of the many other nutrients essential for good health. At the same time, this year the number of

overweight people surpassed the number who are chronically hungry, even in some developing countries.

Agricultural biodiversity is a vital component of dietary diversity, and dietary diversity is expressed in traditional foods that are rich in nutrients and that have such an impact on wellbeing – spiritual and physical. Bioversity has set the pace in raising international awareness of diversity and diet. We have deepened the world's understanding of the value of underutilized species and the important contributions of the vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients that they bring to a healthy and balanced diet.

In this context, I must mention the Italian government's vital contribution to this field of research. Italy played a key role in the development of our programme on nutrition by funding the very first project on underutilized species of the Mediterranean. It was on the basis of the experience and information obtained during this project that Bioversity was able to undertake much larger and more comprehensive studies on the same theme. We have been working on grains and Andean tubers in South America, on nutritious millets in India, and on traditional leafy vegetables in sub-Saharan Africa. All of these projects have contributed to improved food security and better nutrition in rural and urban populations, and all grew out of that first Italian-supported effort.

To focus on just one example, Bioversity's project on traditional African leafy vegetables resulted in an increase of 1100% in supermarket sales in Nairobi, Kenya, in just two years. And demand is still not being fully met. The shelves are empty by mid-afternoon. The project, which aimed to safeguard local agricultural production, helped to preserve valuable species and varieties that are constantly threatened by the homogenizing efforts of industrial agriculture and by environmental degradation. At the same time, it put these valuable vegetables on peoples' plates and boosted the incomes of the farmers – mostly women – who grow them.

We are absolutely convinced that such efforts to make use of dietary diversity represent an effective weapon in the fight against hunger, poverty and malnutrition around the world, and they do so at the same time as protecting the wider environment. They will help agricultural development to go beyond just calories and deliver good nutrition too. As our colleague and friend M.S. Swaminathan, who I am very glad to see here today, has written, "the right to food must become the right to good food".

We sincerely hope that the continuing and indispensable support of the National Academy of Sciences and the government of Italy will allow us to continue and extend this valuable research and thus to make a contribution to meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

The recognition that this St Frances prize gives to Bioversity International will strengthen our commitment to work against hunger and poverty in the world, and on behalf of all of us at Bioversity, I thank you once again.

Emile Frison
Director General