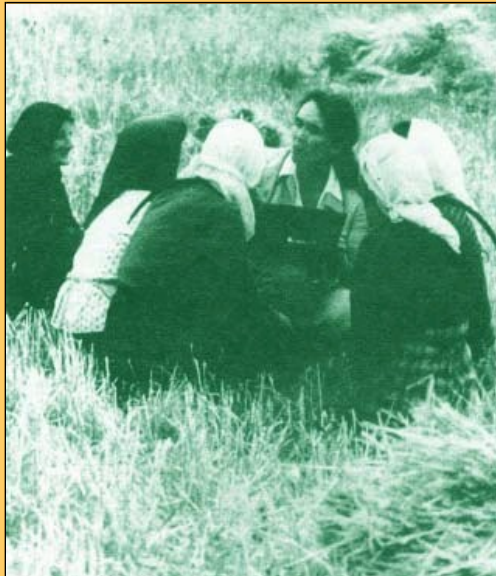


## Erna Bennett: A Lifetime of Conservation



Erna Bennett talking to farmers in the mountains of Greece, while collecting wheat landraces during her time at FAO

Erna Bennett was one of the early pioneers of genetic conservation. After active service in the Second World War in the Middle East and Greece, she returned to her studies. In her early postgraduate years she taught in England, and was engaged in cytogenetic research there and in Ireland for a number of years.

Working the Scottish Plant Breeding Station with J. W. Gregor in the mid-1960s, she returned to her early interest in micro-evolution and the origins of genetic diversity, and began what was then to become a long series of expeditions collecting genetic diversity of mainly forage and cereal crops. At this time she wrote her 1964 paper warning of the need conserve and protect genetic resources, "Plant Introduction and Genetic Conservation: Genecological aspects of an urgent world problem", which was widely read and translated into a number of languages.

Erna joined the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1967, where she succeeded in mobilising the FAO to become involved directly in collecting the genetic resources of crop plants in many countries, while there was still time. She was responsible for coordinating national and international exploration and genetic conservation programmes in the countries of the Mediterranean Basin and southwest and Central Asia as far as Afghanistan, and travelled very widely in the course of her work. She also initiated the first world survey of crop germplasm collections, which yielded invaluable information that has been drawn on widely over the years. As this time she co-authored and edited the first classic book on genetic resources with another early campaigner, Sir Otto Frankel. Published in 1970, "Genetic Resources in Plants" helped to convince in 1972 Stockholm Conference on The Human Environment (a predecessor of the 1992 Earth Summit) to call for the first global programme on the conservation of crop genetic resources.

While at FAO, Erna became increasingly concerned that the immense efforts to collect and conserve the world's precious and irreplaceable germplasm in which she was involved stood in grave danger of being hijacked by powerful private interests. She observed the initial moves towards first, covert, then overt and massive privatisation of genetic resources and the increasingly dominant role of corporations determined to usurp control of immensely valuable agricultural germplasm. Having battled within the FAO for many years to keep corporations out of the UN system, she was eventually forced to resign from the UN in 1982. Since then, she has stayed active on these and other issues-lecturing, writing and advising- but outside official circles.

Erna Bennett was not alone in the first turbulent years of campaigning for programmes on genetic erosion. She remembers with great warmth and affection many of her early fellow pioneers. But as Pat Mooney wrote in his book *Shattering*<sup>1</sup>, "it was this colourful, outspoken Ulster-born Irish revolutionary who first coined the phrase 'genetic conservation' and brought substance and strategy to the term for the world community".