

**FAO International Technical Conference
on Plant Genetic Resources**

**REPORT OF THE SUB-REGIONAL
PREPARATORY MEETING FOR
THE MEDITERRANEAN**

**Tunis, Tunisie
16-19 October 1995**



**Food
and
Agriculture
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**Note by FAO**

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The sub-regional meeting for the Mediterranean area, preparatory to the International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources, was held in Tunis, Tunisia, from 16-19 October, 1995. Representatives from the South and East Mediterranean, and from the Southern part of Europe, as well as observers from international and non governmental organizations, attended the meeting.

II. OPENING CEREMONY

2. Participants were welcomed by Mr. Abderrazak Daaloul, Director-General for Agricultural Production in the Ministry of Agriculture.

3. Mr. Yawooz Adham, Regional Director of IPGRI for West Asia and North Africa, thanked the government of the Republic of Tunisia for hosting the meeting. Mr. Adham explained the involvement of IPGRI with FAO in the preparation for the International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources. Mr. Adham stressed the value of regional collaboration to achieve the objectives and priorities set by national programmes of the region in the field of conservation and use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.

4. Mr. Mohammed Zehni, Director, Plant Production and Protection Division of FAO, on behalf of the Director-General, Mr. Jacques Diouf, expressed sincere appreciation and thanks to the Government of the Republic of Tunisia for having kindly offered to host the meeting. He noted that the meeting was being held on an historic occasion - the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of FAO, and that the conservation and utilization of plant genetic resources, as the basis for food security, was very relevant to the theme of this year's World Food Day: "Food for all". Mr. Zehni stressed the important task that the delegates had before them and the priority given to this work by FAO.



5. Mr. Abdel Kader Cherif, President of the Institute for Agricultural Research and Higher Education delivered the opening keynote address on behalf of his excellency Mr. M'Hamed Ben Rejeb, Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Tunisia. He welcomed all the participants and wished them successful deliberations. He drew attention to the rich agro-biological diversity of the Mediterranean basin which is the centre of origin or diversity for several important crops including barley and other cereals, olive and several species of fruit trees and a wide variety forage and pasture species. He also emphasized the importance of networking to develop plant genetic resources activities in the region.

6. The meeting appreciated the Minister's address and adopted it as a working document.

III. PROCEDURAL MATTERS

7. The meeting elected as Chairman Mr. Abderrazak Daaloul, Director-General for Agricultural Production in the Ministry of Agriculture, Tunisia and former Vice-Chairman of the FAO Commission on Plant Genetic Resources (CPGR). Mr. José Miguel Bolivar, Advisor on agriculture and forestry in the Ministry of Agriculture of Spain, actual Chairman of the CPGR, and Mr. Rashad Abu Al-Enein, Director of Field Crops Research Institute, Agricultural Research Council, Egypt, and former Chairman of the CPGR, were elected as Vice-Chairmen. Mr. Ahmed Birouk, National Coordinator of the Plant Genetic Resources Committee of Morocco, and Professor at Hasan II Institute of Agronomy and Veterinary Medicine was elected Rapporteur.

8. The programme of work of the meeting was adopted.



IV. INTRODUCTION TO THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL CONFERENCE ON PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES, ITS PREPARATORY PROCESS AND EXPECTED OUTPUTS

9. The aims and background of the FAO Fourth International Technical Conference were introduced by Mr. H. David Cooper of the FAO Secretariat. The International Technical Conference was expected to adopt two documents: the first Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources, and a costed Global Plan of Action for the Conservation and Sustainable Utilization of Plant Genetic Resources. These documents were being prepared through a country-driven process with opportunities for country input at several stages. Firstly, countries had prepared Country Reports. Secondly, sub-regional meetings prepared sub-regional synthesis reports and made recommendations for the Global Plan of Action. Thirdly, the intergovernmental Commission on Plant Genetic Resources provides guidance to the overall process and would review and finalize drafts of the two documents. Finally, governments would consider these final drafts at the International Technical Conference itself in Leipzig, Germany, June 17 - 23, 1996. Mr. Cooper outlined some of the recommendations of sub-regional meetings held previously.

10. FAO Conference had requested the preparation of the Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources and the Global Plan of Action in order to provide a scientifically sound basis for the international funding mechanism for the implementation of Farmers' Rights. The two documents would be elements of the FAO Global System for the conservation and utilization of plant genetic resources. UNCED, through Agenda 21, and the Diplomatic Conference for the adoption of the text of the Convention on Biological Diversity had called for the Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources and the Global Plan of Action to be developed through the International Technical Conference.



V. PRESENTATION OF COUNTRY REPORTS AND SUB-REGIONAL SYNTHESIS REPORT

11. Country representatives from Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia presented brief overviews of their Country Reports highlighting major gaps and needs. The observers from Palestine made a statement concerning the conservation and utilization of plant genetic resources in the West Bank and Gaza. Full Country Reports will be made available at the International Technical Conference in Leipzig.

12. A report on the regional meeting for the Europe was presented by Mr. Stefano Padulosi of IPGRI's regional office for Europe.

13. The draft sub-regional synthesis report for the South and East Mediterranean was presented by Mr. Mohammed Tazi, FAO/IPGRI consultant. After appropriate amendments, the synthesis report was endorsed as a useful input for the preparation of the Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources (Annex 1).

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COUNTRIES OF THE SOUTH AND EAST MEDITERRANEAN FOR THE GLOBAL PLAN OF ACTION

14. The countries of the South and East Mediterranean adopted the specific recommendations for the Global Plan of Action as follows.

Policy Level

- i) Elaboration of national strategies and programmes for the conservation and utilization of plant genetic resources for sustainable development. The commitment of policy makers is essential to achieve this goal. Conservation and utilization including the enhancement of local germplasm in national programmes should be set as the priority. More attention should be paid to countries in need.
- ii) Encouragement of the collaboration between different scientists and institutions dealing with plant genetic resources within the countries. The establishment/strengthening of National plant genetic resources Coordination Committees at a high level is necessary to achieve this collaboration.



- iii) Assistance for developing legislation on plant genetic resources including intellectual property rights and Farmer's Rights.
- iv) Creation of public awareness through development of effective integrated mechanisms for sensitizing policy makers, scientific and farming communities and other target groups on the importance of the conservation of plant genetic resources. Effective educational programmes need to be carried out at different levels.

Institutional Level and Capacity Building

- v) Capacity building is needed at all levels for the national programmes of all countries in germplasm collecting, characterization, evaluation, conservation, regeneration, documentation and utilization.
- vi) Development of qualifying training for technicians, as well as managers, in relation to the new concept of biodiversity. The training should consider planning, management and project implementation methodologies, and integration of indigenous knowledge into biodiversity management.
- vii) Emergence of centres of excellence engaged in training on plant genetic resources in coordination with various higher-level educational and research institutions.

Technical Level

for *in situ* conservation

- viii) The management and restoration of ecosystems tacking into account economic and social constraints.
- ix) Preparation of national plans for conservation of wild relatives of crops.
- x) Identification and monitoring of ecosystems, including through inventories of areas with high plant diversity, and determination of genetic diversity of target species in selected sites. Survey of endangered and threatened species, and development of methods to measure sustainability.
- xi) Decisive promotion of *in situ* conservation of forest species and wild crop relatives indigenous to the region as well as on-farm conservation of landraces.
- xii) Establishment of policies and regulations for sustainable *in situ* on farm conservation of crops and their wild relatives.

**for *ex situ* conservation**

- xiii)** Creation or reinforcement of national genebanks facilities for both seed and vegetatively propagated species.
- xiv)** Germplasm collection and re-collection in countries where conservation infrastructures are lacking, or where different factors have hindered germplasm collections. Further collecting expeditions for major and minor crops should be undertaken in all countries.
- xv)** Promoting/strengthening the conservation and use of arid and desert plants and underutilized species.
- xvi)** Extension of the conservation work to horticultural crops (fruit trees, date palm and vegetables) and mobilization of the means to ensure their long-term management (field genebanks).
- xvii)** Engagement of different institutions in the *ex situ* conservation of wild plants mainly through genebanks of forest species, arboreta and botanic gardens. These conservation structures should be developed, supported and organized to meet precise objectives. Core collections for important crops should be established.

for adequate use

- xviii)** Strengthening of evaluation and documentation capabilities of national programmes to ensure a flow of germplasm and information; this will lead to better use of germplasm.
- xix)** Promotion of methodologies for decentralized breeding for adequate use of landraces, based on an integrated system approach that includes socio-economic aspects on the conservation of crops, determination of genetic diversity, and conservation biology research on target species. Emphasis should be placed on the involvement of farmers in the development of breeding objectives and in germplasm characterization and evaluation activities.
- xx)** Establishment or reinforcement of breeding programmes of all crops with economic value with emphasis on fruit trees, vegetables and pasture species to enhance local germplasm use.
- xxi)** Establishment of better institutional linkages between conservation, evaluation and utilization programmes and structures.



Sub-Regional Activities and Collaboration

- xxii)** Encouragement of plant genetic resources information and materials exchange at regional and international level through the creation and/or the reinforcement of specialized networks. The mandate of these networks is to promote collaborative research, exchange of information, exchange of experience and to formulate proposals for sub-regional projects. Special attention should be paid to the spreading of information within the networks and between structures.
- xxiii)** Emergence of regional plant genetic resources centres in different countries to keep duplicates of base collections and to maintain and make available central inventory databases on plant genetic resources of the region. Consideration should be given to the offers of several countries to make facilities available.
- xxiv)** Reinforcement of international legislation and formulation of mechanisms in order to ensure that countries providing genetic resources have access to the benefits arising from their utilization and to promote transfer of innovative and efficient technologies into these countries.
- xxv)** Allocation of sufficient budgets to the internationally created fund for plant genetic resources for activities in countries of the sub-region at the research, training and development level.
- xxvi)** Establishment of international laws that guarantee the access to the universal plant genetic resources collections by all the countries and users, provided that original ownership rights are preserved.
- xxvii)** Establishment of an early warning mechanism based on an integrated system approach to monitor genetic erosion of key species or crop varieties, the maintenance of facilities and scientific standards in genebanks, and the degradation of natural habitats and ecosystems.
- xxviii)** Germplasm previously collected in countries lacking suitable storage facilities and now stored outside these countries should be made available to the country originally providing the material. Countries originally providing material should have the right to repatriate such material including related information.
- xxix)** The reinforcement of collaboration in different fields related to plant genetic resources between national programmes and regional and international organizations and centres such as ACSAD, CIHEAM, ICARDA, FAO, IPGRI, UNDP, UNEP and other relevant institutions. Such collaboration should be based on the concrete regional situation taking into account national priorities.



- xxx) Establishment and development of better linkages between the existing networks dealing with plant genetic resources such as WANANET, ECP/GR, UMS, GREMPA, MESFIN and the Pasture and Forage Mediterranean Network.
- xxxii) Reinforcement of the WANANET to expand and to ensure its continuity and sustainability. A Proposal for supporting this network and its activities should be prepared for the Global Plan of Action.

Implementation of the Global Plan of Action

- xxxiii) National proposals should be given highest priority in the implementation of the Global Plan of Action.

Conclusions of the Meeting and further Recommendations for the Global Plan of Action

15. Without prejudice to the recommendations contained in the report on the regional meeting on Plant Genetic Resources, Nitra, Slovakia 24-27 September 1995, agreed by the European countries, the meeting agreed upon the following observations and recommendations for the Global Plan of Action.

Policy and Institutional Issues

National Programmes

16. The creation of National Programmes with strong co-ordination mechanisms is an essential basis for national activities in conservation and sustainable utilization of PGR. Co-ordination at the national level is important to avoid duplication of work and to promote communication between partners. In order that the national programme be supported politically and institutionally at the highest level, it should have a strong legal basis and preferably should be established by legislation or governmental decree.

17. The aim of national programmes should be to promote and co-ordinate PGR conservation and sustainable utilization activities, to ensure the long term food security of the country and to promote sustainable agriculture and economic development. The national programme should be able to



demonstrate concrete benefits to the country, for example in the form of better performing plant varieties.

18. National committees, ideally involving all relevant sectors - for example, curators, farmers' associations, breeders, agronomists, University scientists, private sector and NGOs - as well as all relevant government departments, should be established to provide the co-ordinating mechanism. National committees should provide scientific guidance, follow up and evaluate activities of national programmes, and promote awareness amongst the public and decision makers.

19. A clear distinction should be made between national programmes and national genebanks. Though the building of national genebanks is seen as a very important component of national programmes, the establishment of co-ordinating mechanisms is considered a prerequisite. The development of regional or sub-regional genebanks might provide alternative options, particularly for conserving duplicate base collections.

20. Whilst the need for international financial support is recognized, the basic running costs of the national programme should be provided by the government on a sustainable basis. Regional and sub-regional Cooperation, including proposed modalities of cooperation in the Mediterranean

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21. It was emphasized that countries on both sides of the Mediterranean face similar problems. The importance of work relevant to arid and semi-arid areas was identified.

22. Existing regional networks, including WANANET, should be further strengthened, and their financial sustainability should be assured. It was agreed that inter-regional cooperation in the Mediterranean should be strengthened in order to set priorities and to identify and reduce wasteful duplication of activities. Such cooperation should include linkages between WANANET and other relevant networks in the Near East, with all relevant networks in Europe. Several examples of successful inter-regional networks were presented. It was recommended that networking be strengthened in the area of *in situ* conservation. It was agreed that an inventory should be made of the various networks relevant to plant genetic resources in the Mediterranean region.



23. Several countries from the South and East Mediterranean expressed the need to receive assistance for the building or strengthening of national plant genetic resource programmes in their own countries. In the context of a regional collaboration across the whole Mediterranean, Europe is seen to play an important role in this regard. European countries are seen as important partners in the region for strengthening national capacities through cost effective actions in the area of training, documentation and information, and through collaborative research programmes, as well as through the provision of storage facilities for safety duplication of germplasm accessions. Multilateral collaboration is recommended.

24. The idea of establishing lead centres or genebanks for specific activities on a regional or sub-regional basis was discussed, including the possibility of the burden of conservation being shared between various countries on a crop by crop basis.

25. It was emphasized, however, that sound national programmes represent the basis for sustainable collaboration in the region. In setting national priorities, it is important to take into account the situation in neighbouring countries in order to avoid duplication of activities and to encourage joint efforts in the region. This could be facilitated by existing regional networks and international organizations.

VII. ROLE OF PUBLIC, PRIVATE AND INFORMAL SECTORS

26. Both public and private sectors have a role to play in the conservation and utilization of plant genetic resources. The private sector should be stimulated to undertake activities, such as plant breeding and seed production and distribution. An enabling environment, including appropriate legislation and the setting of standards, is required in this regard. However, public sector support is recognized as vital for many activities, particularly those of a long term nature, such as conservation and pre-breeding of most species, as well as the development of underutilized species, and plant improvement in marginal environments. Collaboration between the public and private sectors should be promoted where appropriate. Countries should involve the private sector in the definition of priority activities.



27. The role of NGOs is recognized as important and complementary to the role of the formal sector. Their role should be encouraged, particularly in areas where they have a comparative advantage such as environmental education and public awareness, and facilitating links with farming communities.

Access to Genetic Resources

28. The interdependence between countries for plant genetic resources, and the need for international cooperation to ensure their conservation and sustainable utilization, was stressed. The usefulness of the International Code of Conduct for Germplasm Collecting and Transfer, developed by the FAO Commission on Plant Genetic Resources, as a model for national regulations or legislation was noted. The need for a comprehensive multilateral agreement on access to plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, was emphasized, linked to a mechanism for sharing benefits through the support of projects and programmes. The multilateral framework should not exclude the possibility of bilateral mechanisms also being developed. It was noted that negotiations for a multilateral agreement, in the context of the revision of the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources, was underway in the Commission on Plant Genetic Resources.

Financing of the Global Plan of Action

29. The need for international funding of the Global Plan of Action was recognized, including through the reallocation of existing financial resources and the identification of potential new sources. Donors and recipients of funds should cooperate in order to improve efficiency, reduce duplication of effort, and secure the necessary financial resources. Priority in funding should be given to programmes and projects which are part of a coherent national plan. Special priority should be given to projects agreed at the regional or sub-regional level. Donor's contributions to the Global Plan of Action should be in line with the priorities and criteria of the Plan.



VIII. TECHNICAL ISSUES

30. It was noted that whilst genetic resources from the region of the South and East Mediterranean are widely used as inputs to plant improvement programmes globally, the full potential for their utilization in the region is not fully realized. Numerous obstacles limit the effective use of plant genetic resources, including: lack of proper coordination among the genebanks and breeders and other users; lack of sufficient information about conserved germplasm; the long term nature of pre-breeding activities required to broaden the base of breeding materials using landrace material; insufficient capacity for plant breeding in countries; and various constraints affecting the diffusion of both traditional and new varieties.

31. In both Europe and the South and East Mediterranean there exists, on the one hand, high-potential areas where the policy is to promote high-input sustainable agriculture, predominately for competitive export markets, and on the other hand, marginal areas where mostly small scale farming is practiced, and where policy may be directed primarily at maintaining rural populations and preventing land degradation. The need for different approaches to PGR utilization in these two areas was noted; whilst high-yielding varieties, including pure lines and F1 hybrids, may be most appropriate in the high potential areas, greater use of landraces, or improved varieties, or material from crosses of landraces and improved varieties, may be appropriate in the marginal areas, depending on socio-economic conditions.

Characterization, Evaluation and Documentation

32. With a view to promote the greater utilization of conserved germplasm, the importance of good passport data, characterization and evaluation was noted. Characterization should be undertaken by genebanks using at least minimal descriptor lists. For most evaluation features which are environment dependent, especially those which determine yield, evaluation should be undertaken in the appropriate environment, normally by the breeders, farmers or other users of the germplasm. For some traits, however, - disease resistance for example - evaluation can be carried out systematically by specialists located at the genebank, or at other centres. Since farmers are the ultimate users of the material, they should have close interaction with breeders both at initial and more advanced stages of evaluation. University researchers should also be involved in germplasm evaluation since basic research can provide information of longer term value. Re-characterization of material stored in vitro should be carried out periodically. Simple biotechnological techniques may be appropriate for this purpose.



33. Linkages between institutions and research centres involved in characterization and evaluation should be ensured in each country. The role of national PGR programmes is crucial in this regard. For cost effectiveness, national committees, made up by experts in different areas, should oversee such work so as to avoid overlapping of activities, and to ensure that results are distributed to all users. The establishment of crop networks for coordination of evaluation and utilization efforts should be encouraged.

34. A user-friendly documentation system, with standard formats to facilitate data exchange, should be put in place so to allow the dissemination of information on characterization and evaluation to a wider audience of users. Curators of collections should play an important role in maintaining, updating and distributing this important information.

35. Core collections play an important role in enhancing germplasm utilization by making management and screening of collections more efficient and cost effective. Making better use of landraces in breeding programmes, and through their direct use.

Making better use of landraces in breeding programmes, and through their direct use

36. Landraces contain important traits for crop improvement and they also play a major role in sustainable agricultural systems, particularly in marginal environments. Where appropriate in the prevailing socio-economic conditions, the distribution and commercialization of landraces should be promoted. The suitability of landraces for low input cultivation systems make them good candidates for natural / organic agriculture. The special characteristics of some landraces - for flavour, shape or colour, for example-should be evaluated and exploited for niche markets. The economic potential for this type of cultivation should be examined. However the use of landraces also has limitations. Including in marginal environments, there is a need to improve on the traditional landrace varieties grown by farmers.

37. Recognizing that landraces can be utilized in various ways: as sources of individual qualitative traits for plant breeding programmes; as sources of polygenic diversity to broaden the base of plant breeding programmes, through pre-breeding activities, and the introgression of landraces with modern varieties; and the direct use of landraces: efforts are required to expand all three modalities for the use of landraces. This will require greater evaluation of landraces, with the involvement of farmers, and the dissemination of information, including through farmer to farmer exchange.



On-farm conservation

38. On-farm conservation should be promoted as part of an integrated strategy for conservation and use, particularly for the conservation and development of landraces. Landraces evolve together with the environment whilst subject to continuous natural and farmer selection. Research should be promoted to monitor such changes in diversity in landraces.

39. On-farm conservation should be implemented within the context of agricultural development strategies, in order to promote development whilst conserving diversity. The use and the maintenance of landraces is carried out for a complex number of anthropological and socio-economic reasons. Farming systems should be analyzed to identify limiting factors in order to guide strategic interventions which may improve the situation of the farmer.

40. On-farm conservation should be considered as a dynamic form of PGR management. Farmer-selection of varieties to improve their performance, should be promoted. Decentralized approaches to plant breeding might be developed in support of these activities.

Underutilized species

41. Many useful species used in everyday life which contribute greatly to diet diversification have never been properly collected, characterized or evaluated. This is the case for instance of underutilized species which offer the opportunity for additional income to farmers and create opportunities for agricultural diversification. In priority setting on a species basis, consideration should be given to under-utilized crops as a group. The importance of developing under-utilized stress tolerant plants, and of promoting the use of medicinal plants, were particularly emphasized.



Regulatory Framework

42. Variety release and seed certification legislation, and plant breeders' rights legislation, often include requirements for distinctness, uniformity and stability which may sometimes hinder the utilization of diverse genetic material, including the commercialization of landraces. However, many countries have provisions in their regulatory frameworks which are less rigorous in this regard. The European Union, for example, allows ecotypes of forage crops to be marketed. It is recommended that countries review their regulatory frameworks for their effects on PGR conservation and use, and promote flexibility of implementation, or the creation of special categories, in order to allow for the distribution and commercialization of landraces.

43. Following the Uruguay Round agreement, adopted in Marrakech in 1994, most countries are required to develop intellectual property protection for plant varieties in line with the agreement on trade related intellectual property rights. In developing such sui generis systems of IPR protection, countries should take into consideration matters related to the conservation and utilization of diverse genetic materials.

Forest and Pasture Species

44. Forests are a basic element for the conservation and the sustainable utilization of the Mediterranean ecosystem, because of their fundamental role for the protection of the environment as well as for the supply of a variety of functions, services and products. Forest genetic resources should be conserved and managed according to a global vision including agriculture and range resources, within the general framework of the national Mediterranean Forest Action Programmes. The important role of the FAO Expert Panel on Forest Gene Resources in setting global priorities was recognized.

45. More emphasis should also be placed on the conservation of pasture species, which play an important role in the agricultural systems of the region. There is a need to develop methodologies for sustainable rangeland management in order to avoid the loss of their diversity due to several degradation factors, particularly overgrazing.



IX. CLOSING CEREMONY

46. Mr. Daaloul, Chairman, summed up the proceedings of the meeting. He hoped that the work of the meeting would make an important contribution to the development of the Global Plan of Action through the International Technical Conference.

47. Mr. Rashad Abu Al-Enein, speaking on behalf of the participants, thanked the Tunisian hosts for their hospitality.

48. Mr. Brahim Amouri, FAO Representative, congratulated the participants on the useful contribution that the meeting would provide to the development of the Global Plan of Action. He also thanked the Tunisian authorities, and noted that Tunisia was hosting several meetings concerning plant genetic resources and biodiversity in October 1995.

49. Professor Belgacem Henchi, Chargé de mission in the Secretariat for Scientific Research and Technology, on behalf of his excellency Mr. Mongi Safra, Secretary of State for Scientific Research and Technology, officially closed the meeting. In his closing address, he drew pointed out that President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali had declared the conservation and utilization of PGR to be a priority activity, and that, in this context, the government had established a 15-point action programme. He thanked FAO for holding the meeting in Tunisia and congratulated the participants on the successful outcome of the meeting.