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***Strengthening Partnership in Agricultural Research
for Development in the Context of Globalization***

THE CRUCIBLE GROUP EXPERIENCE*

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The Crucible II Project

The concept of the Crucible II Project was initially endorsed in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1998, by a diverse assembly of people with backgrounds in northern and southern private industry, government, civil society organizations, indigenous peoples organizations, universities, multilateral institutions, universities and the CGIAR.¹ Based on their own experiences, these people felt it would be useful to sponsor a series of informal meetings between representatives of key ‘stakeholder’ positions in the (very loosely defined) field of genetic resource policy. Several of these people were involved in the first round of Crucible Group meetings held in 1992/93, which culminated in the publication of *People, Plants and Patent*. While it was never ‘on the books’ to have a second round of meetings under the Crucible Group rubric, everyone in Uppsala agreed that developments in biotechnology and genetic resource-related policies in the intervening 5 years called for second round of Crucible-style talks.

Perhaps what most distinguishes past and current Crucible rounds from other research initiatives in the field is their informal, multi-stakeholder, non-consensus modality. The shortness of this paper does not allow for more than a few examples of the benefits of this modality as a means of overcoming impediments to progress in the field of genetic resource policy. (Example No. 1): policies that may ultimately effect the control and management of genetic resources are simultaneously addressed in numerous international, national and local fora. It often occurs therefore, that policy-makers and advocates participating in one or two of these fora will not be aware of the fact that overlapping, sometimes contradictory, approaches to the same issues are being developed in other fora. Bringing together participants with experience in a number of different fora increases exponentially the information that is available to the members of the group when they are analyzing policy options.

(Example No. 2): most of the fora wherein genetic resource policy is considered are characterized by a culture of opposition that discourages constructive dialogue between people with different views. Delegates and observers rarely (if ever) sit down with their erstwhile adversaries to see if they can find any common ground. Instead, what one often experiences (at international meetings at least) is an exacerbation of differences of opinion among key stakeholders. Providing a neutral forum where immediate decisions do not have to be made, Crucible-style meetings promote open discussion between people who would otherwise never sit at the same table. Such a setting encourages participants to collectively move past ‘sticking points’ that have characterized debate in the area (and progress to new ones in the process). It is important to note that the ultimate aim of this kind of dialogue is not necessarily to reach consensus. In an area as hotly contested as genetic resource policy, forging consensus can not realistically be the primary motivation for supporting this kind of project. An equally important, but more attainable outcome of this kind of dialogue is that it allows parties who continue to disagree over an issue to learn the subtler nuances of each others’ positions.

In its desire to take maximum advantage of these aspects of a multi-sectoral, non-consensus modality, the Crucible group turned its collective attention to two related research tasks. The first task, which is now completed, was to identify and critically evaluate developments over the last five years – since

¹ Two years later, the Crucible II Project is being supported by Sida-SAREC, SDC, BMZ/GTZ, IDRC, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, and CIDA. The project is governed by a Management Committee which is comprised of the larger investors and three research partners.

the publication of *People, Plants and Patents* -- that have had (or should have had) an impact on genetic resource policy. In this context, the group considered scientific and technological developments, changes in the natural environment, international and domestic policy, public opinion, globalization, and so on. As it turned out, even agreeing on what the most significant developments were, and how to frame discussion about them, turned out to be a challenge. In the end however, much to everyone's surprise, the group did agree on twelve key recommendations regarding genetic resource policy issues.

Our work on this task is presented in the first volume of a two volume publication, entitled *Seeding Solutions: Policy Options for Genetic Resources, Vol. 1*. (The Crucible Group will launch that publication on May 15, 2000, at COP V, in Nairobi. Copies will be distributed during presentation of this paper to the Global Forum on Agricultural Research, May 22, 2000)

The second task was to identify and critically assess the range of practical policy options that are open to national policy-makers in light of the analysis described above and set out in *Seeding Solutions, Volume 1*. The written summary of these discussions will be released in *Seeding Solutions, Volume 2* (in August of this year, we hope). In this volume, we will present 'menus' of national policy/legal options for domestic policy advocates to refer to when deciding what kinds of national genetic resource-related laws they want. These 'menus' are divided into subsections, which provide different options for how to deal with particularly difficult issues. Readers will be able to 'pick and choose' their way through these menus with an eye towards constructing legislative frameworks that are most suited to their own national contexts. (A large portion of these options are dedicated to exploring possible sui generis forms of intellectual property protection laws for plant varieties, biological innovations, and indigenous and local knowledge.) The options are annotated regarding their relationship to international agreements such as TRIPS, CBD, ILO 169 and so on. Where the participants disagree about the practical significance of a provision, or its legal relationship to international law, the details of this disagreement are recorded in the text. Similarly, where participants jointly recommend the adoption of one policy approach or legal mechanism, we record that recommendation.

Given the process the Crucible Group has gone through to write these two volumes, we expect that readers will find them both sympathetic to the dilemmas that policy-makers sometimes find themselves in, and useful as a means to resolve them. Volume 2 in particular should provide a very useful point of reference for national policy actors struggling with their policy options regarding: national priorities for research, development and innovation, plant breeding, biotechnology, indigenous and local knowledge, and access to biological resources within the country.

The Crucible II Project has been working for just over two years. Over that period of time, our numbers have slowly increased. Almost fifty people participated in the writing and revisions of *Seeding Solutions, Volume 1*. We may have more participants by the time we finish Volume 2. We have found that while it is important to strike a representative balance of stakeholders in a project like this, it is equally important to be flexible about both the definition of 'membership' and involving additional people as the project progresses. It has happened that individuals in particularly sensitive positions (e.g., working for governmental multilateral institutions) have had a lot to offer the project, but could not risk the censure of member states by signing-on as 'members' of the group. We have accommodated their situations by listing them as contributors or observers, without requiring that they be members, per se. It has also happened that the group's discussions have evolved to points where we have found ourselves in need of additional expertise, and we have had to bring in new people to fill those knowledge gaps. In both situations, our flexibility has enhanced the degree of expertise and collective sympathies of the project.

This second Crucible round, like the one before it, has met and in some ways surpassed the expectations that were originally set for it. One of the unintended benefits that is now becoming obvious as the project nears its completion, is that the project has created a very strong network of experts from an extraordinarily diverse range of perspectives on genetic resource policies. The Crucible II project's research tasks are almost completed, yet this network endures. Some participants

in the project are continuing to enjoy the fruits of that network on an ad hoc basis in the work they are doing. One question that we need to address is whether we should be making more systematic efforts to continue to engage this network.