

Biodiversity

FOR FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

30 years of the Commission
on Genetic Resources
for Food and Agriculture

Biodiversity for food and agriculture is among the earth's most important resources. Crops, livestock, aquatic organisms, forest trees, micro-organisms and invertebrates – thousands of species and their genetic variability – make up the web of biodiversity upon which the world's food production depends.

Biodiversity is indispensable: be it the insects that pollinate plants, the microscopic bacteria used for making cheese, the diverse livestock breeds used to make a living in harsh environments, or the thousands of varieties of crops that sustain food security worldwide. Biodiversity is essential for achieving nutritional diversity in diets – a diverse food basket – which is important for human health and development.

However, biodiversity, and in particular genetic diversity, is being lost at an alarming rate. The threats to genetic diversity include:

- a focus on the development and use of only a few commercial crop varieties and breeds of livestock,

neglecting locally adapted varieties and breeds and their important characteristics;

- the effects of increasing population pressure;
- the loss of natural habitats and environmental degradation, including deforestation, desertification and river-basin modification; and
- climate change.



COMMISSION ON
GENETIC RESOURCES
FOR FOOD AND
AGRICULTURE

30 YEARS
1983 - 2013



1983

FAO Conference adopts the *International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources*. The Commission is established to address plant genetic resources.



1991

FAO Conference recognizes the sovereign rights of nations over their plant genetic resources.

1995

The Commission's mandate is broadened to include all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture (plants, animals, aquatic resources, forests, micro-organisms and invertebrates).



30 years at a glance

1989

First recognition of Farmers' Rights as rights arising from the past, present and future contributions of farmers in conserving, improving and making available plant genetic resources, particularly those in the centres of origin of diversity.



1994

Agreements established between FAO and institutions holding plant germplasm collections. Twelve centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research agree to hold the designated germplasm "in trust for the benefit of the international community".



1996

Launch of *The State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*. Adoption of the *Global Plan of Action for the Conservation and Sustainable Utilization of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture* negotiated by the Commission, by 150 countries at the International Technical Conference in Leipzig, Germany.



Genetic resources are the raw materials that local communities and researchers rely upon to improve the quality and output of food production. When these resources are eroded, humankind loses potential means of adapting agriculture to new socio-economic and environmental conditions. It is because of their genetic variability that plants, animals, micro-organisms and invertebrates are able to adapt and survive when their environments change. Maintaining and using a wide range of diversity – both diversity among species and genetic diversity within species – therefore means maintaining capacity to respond to future challenges. For example, plants and animals that are genetically tolerant of high temperatures or droughts, or resistant to pests and diseases, are of great importance in climate change adaptation.

Maintaining biodiversity for food and agriculture is

a global responsibility. As countries seek to diversify and adapt their agricultural and food-production systems, the exchange of genetic resources and the interdependence of countries increases. With climate change, the conservation and sustainable use of genetic diversity has become more critical than ever. The challenge of conserving and sustainably using genetic resources extends across all continents and ecosystems and demands a broad-based response. The Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture is the only international forum that specifically deals with all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture (i.e. plants, animals, aquatic resources, forests, micro-organisms and invertebrates). This unique international platform promotes a world without hunger by fostering the use and development of the whole portfolio of biodiversity important to food security and rural poverty alleviation.



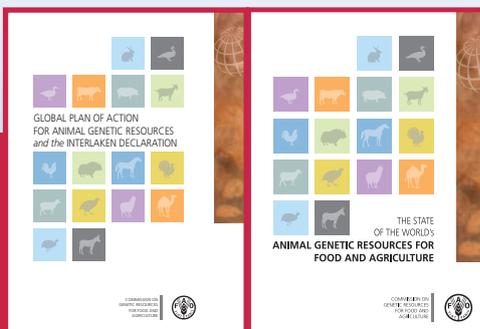
2001

The Commission concludes negotiation

of the *International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*, a legally binding instrument that establishes the Multi-lateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing and recognizes Farmers' Rights.

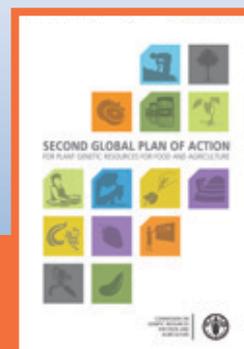
2007

Launch of *The State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*. Adoption of the *Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources* by the International Technical Conference in Interlaken, Switzerland, for which the Commission acted as preparatory committee. The Commission adopts its ten-year rolling Multi-Year Programme of Work.



2011

Adoption of the *Second Global Plan of Action for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*.



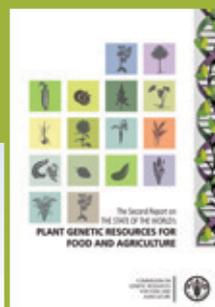
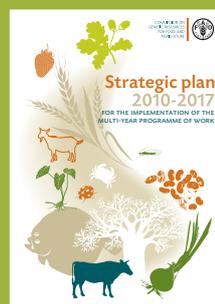
2004

The *International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture* enters into force.



2009

Launch of the *Second Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*. Adoption of the *Strategic Plan 2010-2017* for the implementation of the Multi-Year Programme of Work. Adoption of the *Funding Strategy for the Implementation of the Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources*.



2013



About the Commission on Genetic Resource for Food and Agriculture

Aware of the importance of biodiversity for food and agriculture to global food security, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) established the Commission in 1983. The Commission's initial mandate – to address *plant* genetic resources for food and agriculture – was broadened in 1995 to include all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture, “to facilitate an integrated approach to agrobiodiversity and coordination with governments, which are increasingly dealing with policy issues regarding biological diversity in an integrated manner” (FAO Conference, Resolution 3/95).

Comprising 177 member countries and the European Union, the Commission offers an intergovernmental forum where global consensus can be reached on policies relevant to biodiversity for food and agriculture. The

main objectives of the Commission are to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from their use, for present and future generations.

The work of the Commission focuses on developing and overseeing the implementation of policies and supporting initiatives that not only raise awareness but also seek ways to solve emerging problems. It guides the preparation of periodic global assessments of the status and trends of genetic diversity, the threats facing genetic diversity and the measures being taken to promote its conservation and sustainable use. The Commission also negotiates global action plans, codes of conduct and other instruments relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture.

The Commission is currently supported by three intergovernmental technical sectoral working groups, which assist its work in the areas of plant, animal and forest genetic resources. The Commission can also establish other subsidiary bodies. For example, in 2011, it established an ad hoc working group dealing with access and benefit-sharing for genetic resources for food and agriculture. The Commission's work includes advising FAO on policies, programmes and activities related to genetic resources.

The Commission's Secretariat, housed at FAO headquarters in Rome, prepares and oversees the preparation of working documents, background studies and technical reports, and provides other secretarial services to support the work of the Commission. The Secretariat also monitors developments and trends that are relevant to the work of the Commission and keeps the Commission informed of emerging issues. It cooperates with the technical divisions of FAO, which provide technical and scientific expertise and, upon request, provide support to national and regional programmes.

Multi-Year Programme of Work

In 2007, the Commission launched its Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPOW), a rolling ten-year work plan, which includes the preparation of country-driven state of the world reports for various components of biodiversity for food and agriculture. The MYPOW was updated in 2011 and currently covers the period up to 2021. It foresees for the Commission's Sixteenth Regular Session the presentation of the first *State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture*. While all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture stand alone as distinct contributors to food security, they also share common features and face common threats. The Commission takes a holistic view in addressing the individual components and also addresses cross-sectorial matters. The latter include:

- access to genetic resources and the sharing of benefits derived from their use;
- climate change;
- targets and indicators for measuring the progress of programmes addressing genetic erosion and measures to improve conservation and sustainable use;

The International Plant Treaty ensures benefit-sharing and recognizes Farmers' Rights

The Commission negotiated the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, which came into force in 2004. The Treaty promotes the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from their use. Through the Treaty, countries agreed to establish an efficient, effective and transparent multilateral system to facilitate access to key plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, and share the benefits in a fair and equitable way. The Treaty also recognizes the enormous contribution that the local and indigenous communities and farmers of all regions of the world, particularly those in the centres of origin of crop diversity, have made and will continue to make to the conservation and development of plant genetic resources.

The responsibility for realizing Farmers' Rights, as they relate to plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, rests with national governments. The Commission and the Governing Body of the Treaty cooperate to monitor threats to plant genetic diversity and identify priority collaborative actions for the future.

- the contribution of biodiversity to nutrition;
- the application of ecosystem approaches incorporating all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture and supporting *in situ* conservation and sustainable farming systems; and
- biotechnologies for the conservation and utilization of genetic resources.

The Commission's regular reviews of the MYPOW enable governments to respond to new and emerging developments and challenges.

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