

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 and crop diversity, have made and will continue to make for 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.

- serves as a planning tool to its Members, which can now improve national policy coordination and mid-term planning of activities;
- provides a vehicle to strengthen international cooperation with all the actors, from research to farmers' organizations, involved in the conservation and use of biodiversity for food and agriculture;
- facilitates cooperation with the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, particularly with regard to the supporting components of the Treaty that are overseen by the Commission;

- helps to programme cooperation with the Convention on Biological Diversity in order to support joint implementation of respective programmes of work; and
- allows the Commission to advise FAO systematically on the full range of its activities on genetic resources and biodiversity for food and agriculture, and on the priorities to be accorded to such work in FAO's Programme of Work and Budget.

The Commission will routinely review the MYPOW. Through these reviews governments will be able to respond, through the Commission, to new and emerging developments and challenges.

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Biodiversity for a world without hunger

THE COMMISSION ON GENETIC RESOURCES
FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

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

Biodiversity is indispensable, be it insects pollinating plants, microscopic bacteria needed for making cheese, diverse breeds of livestock needed for making a living even in the harshest of environments, or the thousands of varieties of crops that sustain food security worldwide. For thousands of years, humankind has used, developed and relied on biodiversity for food and agriculture.

Biodiversity, and in particular genetic diversity, is being lost at an alarming rate. With the erosion of these resources mankind loses the potential to adapt to new socio-economic and environmental conditions, such as population growth and climate change.

Maintaining biodiversity for food and agriculture is a global responsibility. The FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture is the international forum that specifically deals with all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture.

DIVERSITY – OUR LIFELINE TO THE FUTURE

Genetic resources are the raw materials that local communities and researchers rely upon to improve the quality and output of food production. Biodiversity is

essential to achieve nutritional diversity in diets – a diverse food basket, which is important for human health and development. Countries exchange genetic resources continuously to diversify and adapt their agriculture and food production, and might increasingly do so in future. The global population will grow and with it the need to increase food production significantly.

To be able to cope with new conditions, researchers and communities need as much diversity as possible – both diversity of species and genetic diversity within species. The more diversity, the more options will be available to respond to changing conditions and future challenges, such as climate change. In fact, with climate change the conservation and sustainable use of genetic diversity has become more critical than ever.

The threats to genetic diversity include:

- the focus on development and use of only a few commercial crop varieties and breeds of livestock neglecting locally adapted varieties and farm animals and their important contributions;
- the impact of increasing population pressure and the resulting urbanization of environments;



- the loss of natural habitats and environmental degradation, including deforestation, desertification or river basin modification; and
- global warming, which affects conditions for food production.

Erosion of genetic resources extends across all continents and ecosystems, providing the critical need for the broad-based response that the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture provides. The Commission is well positioned to stem the tide of genetic erosion of all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture. The Commission provides a unique international platform to achieve a world without hunger by contributing to maximizing the use of the whole portfolio of biodiversity important to food security and rural poverty alleviation.

THE COMMISSION ON GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Aware of the importance of biodiversity for food and agriculture for global food security, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) established the intergovernmental Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture in 1983. The Commission's original mandate – to address *plant* genetic resources for food and agriculture – was broadened in 1995, to include all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture.

With more than 170 Members, the Commission offers an intergovernmental forum to reach global consensus on policies relevant to biodiversity for food and agriculture. The main objectives of the Commission are to ensure the conservation and sustainable utilization 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 new initiatives that not only raise awareness of the issues, but also look to the future for ways to solve problems. It guides the periodic preparation of global assessments of the status and trends of genetic diversity, the threats to genetic diversity and measures being taken for its conservation and sustainable use. The Commission also negotiates action plans, codes of conduct and other instruments relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture.

The Commission's work includes advising FAO on policies, programmes and activities related to genetic resources. The Commission is supported by intergovernmental technical working groups which advise it on technical matters. It has currently two sectoral working groups, one on plant and one on animal genetic resources. The Commission's Secretariat, housed at FAO headquarters in Rome, prepares and oversees the preparation of working

From plants to animals, to...

When the FAO Conference decided to expand the Commission's mandate from its original focus on plant genetic resources to all components of biodiversity of relevance to food and agriculture, with its Resolution 3/95, it recognized that the expanded mandate would serve 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."

documents, background studies and technical reports, and provides other secretarial services to support the work of the Commission. The Secretariat also monitors new developments and trends in biodiversity that are relevant to the work of the Commission, and keeps the Commission informed of emerging topics and issues. It cooperates with the technical services of FAO which provide technical and scientific expertise and, upon request, support to national and regional programmes.

TAKING A WIDER VIEW OF GENETIC DIVERSITY

In 2007, the Commission launched its Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPOW), a rolling 10-year work plan covering all biodiversity of relevance to food and agriculture. This programme includes the preparation of country-driven state of the world reports for various

components of biodiversity for food and agriculture, and covers a whole range of cross-sectorial matters. The MYPOW foresees for the Commission's sixteenth regular session the first-ever *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 threats. The Commission is taking a holistic view in addressing the individual components and also covers cross-sectorial matters. The latter include:

- access to genetic resources and the sharing of benefits derived from their use;
- biotechnologies for the conservation and utilization of genetic resources;
- targets and indicators to measure progress of programmes addressing genetic erosion and measures to improve conservation and sustainable use; and
- application of ecosystem approaches incorporating all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture, and supporting *in situ* conservation and sustainable farming systems.

The Multi-Year Programme of Work:

- enables the Commission to implement its multidisciplinary mandate through a planned and staged approach;

MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF THE COMMISSION ON GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

1983

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

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 or diversity.

1991

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

1994

Agreements established between FAO and institutions holding plant germplasm collections. Through these agreements, 12 Centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) agree to hold the designated germplasm "in trust for the benefit of the international community."

1995

The Commission mandate is broadened to include all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture.

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.

2001

The Commission concludes negotiations 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.

2004

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

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 10-year rolling Multi-Year Programme of Work.