



# RECOGNIZING GENDER ASPECTS IN AGROBIODIVERSITY INITIATIVES

## GENDER RELATIONS AND POLICIES, INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES

A range of legal instruments exists that regulate the management and use of agrobiodiversity. Although they are established at the global level, it appears difficult to locate them at the local level. In many instances, extension workers, farmers and even researchers are unaware of their existence or their contents. However, managers and users of agrobiodiversity should be aware of their existence and main purpose. This fact sheet will give a short overview to which extent gender issues have been taken up in international policies and agreements concerning agrobiodiversity. This paper will not, however, analyse the regional details concerning ratification of these legal instruments or existence of different national policies<sup>1</sup>.

In terms of gender, these legal instruments do not make any attempt to discuss the gender implications of resulting policies and legal agreements. Only the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Global Plan of Action acknowledge the key role played by women, especially in the developing world, in the management and use of biological resources. It is a challenge for extension workers, researchers and farmers to understand the impact and meaning of these legal instruments in their daily work.

- ⑥ Since the 1930s there has been increasing official public concern about the loss of agrobiodiversity. The first international agreement on biodiversity, the **International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources (IU)**, was adopted by FAO in the early 1980s to protect plant genetic resources. The IU covers all Plant Genetic Resources and addresses the exploration, preservation, evaluation and the availability of plant genetic resources. A total of 113 countries have adhered to the IU; the provisions of the IU have always been voluntary – it was a non-binding agreement. The IU was renegotiated by the FAO Intergovernmental Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, resulting in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA).
- ⑥ **The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture** was finally agreed on by the 184 governments attending the FAO Conference in November 2001. Its objectives are the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. It also covers the fair and equitable sharing derived from their use for sustainable agriculture and food security. The Treaty is in harmony with the Convention on Biological Diversity (see below). It officially came into force on the 29 June 2004. The Treaty covers all PGRFA and contains provisions for the conservation and sustainable use of plant diversity, international cooperation and technical assistance. The Treaty recognizes the enormous contribution farmers and their communities have made, and continue to make, to the conservation and development of plant genetic resources. This is the basis for Farmers' Rights. The Treaty also establishes a multilateral system of access and benefit sharing, which applies to over 64 major crops and forages selected based on the criteria for

<sup>1</sup> Further information on these aspects can be obtained in *Law and policy of relevance to the management of plant genetic resources* by S. Bragdon, C. Fowler and Z. Franca (Eds). 2003. Learning Module, ISNAR, The Hague, The Netherlands.



food security and interdependence among countries and regions. Benefits arising from the multilateral system will be part of the funding strategy of the International Treaty. Priority will be given to the implementation of agreed plans and programmes for farmers in developing countries practicing the sustainable management of plant genetic diversity. The Treaty is legally binding for all ratifying countries, requiring conformity of all national laws and regulations.

- ⑥ The **Global Plan of Action (GPA)** for conservation and sustainable utilization of plant genetic resources was adopted by 150 countries in the Fourth International Technical Conference on Plant Genetic Resources, held in Leipzig in 1996. The GPA is a supporting component of the International Treaty. This means that contracting parties to the ITPGRFA should promote its effective implementation, through national actions and international cooperation. The GPA provides a coherent framework, which identifies 20 priority activities in the fields of *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation, sustainable utilization as well as institution and capacity building (FAO, 1996). The GPA contains many references to the roles of women in the conservation of plant diversity. Moreover, it develops activities and measures to strengthen women's capacity to sustainably manage these resources. In particular, references are contained in the following priority activities<sup>2</sup>: on-farm conservation (para. 31, 33 and 43 of the GPA); promoting the conservation of wild crop relatives (para. 67 and 70); characterization and evaluation (para. 158); promoting the development and commercialization of underutilized crops and species (para. 189, 193, 203, 204); expanding and improving education and training (para 307).
- ⑥ The **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**, adopted in 1992, covers all components of biodiversity, from genes to species and ecosystems, and recognizes the importance of genetic resources and their conservation. In particular, in its preamble, the Convention has recognized the vital role women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. Moreover, CBD affirmed the need for the full participation of women, at all levels of policy-making and implementation, for biological diversity conservation. In the Third Conference of the Parties in 1997, member states recognized the need to empower indigenous and local communities. Also, the necessity of building their capacity for *in situ* conservation and sustainable use and management of agricultural biological diversity, thus building on indigenous knowledge systems. This Convention is legally binding for ratifying countries (183 as of March 2002). As above, ratifying countries must adopt appropriate legislation/regulations and/or bring existing ones into harmony with the Convention. The Convention does not apply to non-ratifying countries. By its Decision V/5, the countries at the Conference of the Parties of the CBD have established a programme of work on agrobiodiversity. This decision describes the components of agrobiodiversity and recognizes that the special nature and features of agriculture biodiversity deserve distinctive solutions in terms of policy and programming. As described in the CBD, agrobiodiversity is essential to satisfying human needs for food and livelihood security. Moreover, there is great interdependence between countries in regard to genetic resources for food and agriculture.
- ⑥ The **Global Strategy for the Management of Farm Animal Genetic Resources** provides a technical and operational framework for assisting countries. It contains several key elements, such as the Global Inventory of Farm Animal Genetic Resources through the State of the World Report. This will facilitate the analysis of the level of endangerment of the world's resources, and the establishment of conservation priorities. The Strategy aims to assist countries in their efforts to characterize and monitor their resources. Programmes and action plans will be developed for the conservation and sustainable utilization of countries' resources. As States have sovereign rights over their own biological resources, they are also responsible for their sustainable

---

<sup>2</sup> See [www.fao.org/ag/agp/agps/pgr/default.htm](http://www.fao.org/ag/agp/agps/pgr/default.htm)



conservation and utilization. States participating in the FAO global strategy for the management of farm animal genetic resources were invited to nominate a national focal point for animal genetic resources, and a national coordinator. These people are responsible for activities within countries concerning the management of animal genetic resources. They are also responsible for the country's contribution to global efforts, especially in exchange of information and data.

⑥ The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (CEDAW) is another legal instrument, which directly addresses discrimination against women and commits member countries to put the objectives of the convention into practice. This Convention could provide a useful framework for the implementation of the above listed legal agreements. CEDAW, adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 Articles, it defines discrimination against women, and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. By accepting the Convention, states commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, including the:

- incorporation of the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolition of all discriminatory laws and adoption of appropriate rulings prohibiting discrimination against women;
- establishment of tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and
- ensuring the elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises.

Countries that have ratified, or acceded to, the Convention are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures taken to comply with their treaty obligations. Entering into force on 3 September 1981, as of March 2004 a total of 176 states are Parties to the Convention.

Despite this increased recognition of gender differences, and implications at the international level, little has been done to implement this knowledge in national policies and programmes for agrobiodiversity management and conservation.

As stated in the Report on the State of the World's Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, the main cause of genetic erosion in crops, reported by almost all countries, is the replacement of local varieties by improved or exotic varieties and species. As old varieties in farmers' fields are replaced by the newer, genetic erosion frequently occurs. Genes and gene complexes found in the many farmers' varieties are not contained in the modern variety. In addition, the sheer number of varieties is often reduced when commercial varieties are introduced into traditional farming systems. This is similarly true for the replacement of animal genetic resources.

The report acknowledges the negative impacts these processes have on small farmers, especially on women, who depend on genetic diversity for their livelihoods.

Nonetheless, there are still many examples of national policy and development projects that promote commercial production. These focus on a few major cash crops, which threaten existing agrobiodiversity and food security. The more production is managed for commercial purposes, the more high-yielding varieties and breeds are used. In turn traditional risk reduction, the use of a wide diversity of varieties and breeds, becomes less important. Many local varieties and breeds are still categorized as low-performing and inferior by national extension services and research organizations. Therefore, national policies provide incentives for the use of modern varieties and breeds. This may lead to the irreversible loss of genetic diversity or it may impact upon traditional and established gender roles and responsibilities. The following example from Mali highlights the impact on agrobiodiversity use and gender roles.

## COMMERCIAL GARDENING IN MALI

In a Bamana village in Mali, women's subsistence production, which is based on local plant biodiversity, came into increased competition with men's production of exotic crops for the market. During this process, women's production was marginalized or even lost. Women were traditionally responsible for producing or collecting the traditional plant varieties, used to make sauces and relishes that they historically produced in home gardens. However, a market-gardening regime has developed in the community. This is directed towards satisfying a growing urban demand for fresh produce rather than local domestic requirements. Market gardening typically involves non-traditional fruit and vegetable crops. Middle-aged men dominate the garden leadership.

Source: Wooten, 2003.

Due to modern technologies and changes in perceptions, women have lost their influence over production they traditionally controlled. Access to resources has been lost to men, who benefit from extension services and can buy seeds, fertilizers and the required technologies. In this way, women lose their status and self-determination; they are not compensated in any way.

The above case study shows that agrobiodiversity is threatened because it is **not** used, not because it is overused, as is the case with many wildlife or wild plant species. Modern research, development and centralized plant breeding have mostly ignored and undermined the capacities of local farming communities' innovation and improvement of local plant varieties, which has often led to their replacement.

Conventional breeding programmes tend to focus heavily on 'broad adaptability'. This is the capacity of a plant to produce a high average yield over a range of growing environments and years. Unfortunately, genetic material that produces very good yields in one growing zone but poor yields in another tends to be quickly eliminated from the breeder's gene pool. Yet, this may be exactly what small farmers in some areas need. The resulting 'improved' varieties often require heavy doses of fertilizer and other chemicals, which most poor farmers cannot afford. Moreover, professional breeders often work in relative isolation from farmers. They are sometimes unaware of the multitude of preferences – beyond yield and resistance to diseases and pests – of their target farmers.



A few of the dozens of plant traits of interest to small-scale farmers are ease of harvest, storage, taste, cooking qualities, how fast a crop matures and the suitability of crop residues as livestock feed. Despite this wealth of knowledge, conventional breeding programmes have limited farmers' participation to the evaluation of and comments on a few experimental varieties prior to their official release. Participating in this way leaves few farmers feeling ownership of the research, or that they have contributed their technical expertise. If farmers had been given the chance to assess critically varieties reaching on-farm trials, many would have been eliminated from testing years earlier. Farmers – and in many cases, women farmers – have been the chief engineers of crop and variety development for thousands of years. Today they continue to actively select and breed most crops. These include the so-called minor or underutilized crops that are so important to family nutrition.

However, many encouraging examples exist where farmers are involved in crop improvement and breeding. One alternative approach for developing countries is **participatory plant breeding**, as it has been recognized that conventional breeding programmes have brought little benefit to agro-ecological and socio-economical marginal environments. Such an approach can potentially contribute to the conservation and sustainable management of plant genetic resources.

The principal aims of participatory plant breeding are to create more relevant technology and equitable access. However, depending on the organizations involved, there are often other objectives. For example, large-scale breeding programmes run by international or national research agencies may wish to cut research costs. Other organizations, such as farmer's groups and NGOs, may wish to affirm local people's rights over genetic resources. They may produce seed, build farmers' technical expertise or develop new products for niche markets, such as organically grown food.

## Key points

- A range of legal instruments exist that regulate the management and use of agrobiodiversity. In terms of gender aspects, these legal instruments do not make any attempt to discuss the gender implications of resulting policies and legal agreements.
- Plant genetic resources were initially seen as humanity's common heritage. The Convention on Biological Diversity gave nations a sovereign right over their genetic resources and requires prior informed consent for their use (UNEP, 1992).
- The view of PGRs, as common property, is rapidly changing to perceiving them as objects of trade.
- Despite increased recognition of gender differences, and implications at the international level, little has been done to implement this knowledge in policies and programmes for agrobiodiversity management and conservation.
- Agrobiodiversity is threatened because it is not used, not because it is overused, which is the case for many wildlife or wild plant species.
- There are many examples of national policy and development projects that promote commercial production. They focus on few major cash crops, thus threatening existing agrobiodiversity and food security. Changes have been observed in gender roles and responsibilities.



## References

Bragdon S., Fowler, C. & Franca, Z. eds. 2003. Law and policy of relevance to the management of plant genetic resources Learning Module, ISNAR, The Hague, Netherlands.

FAO. 1996. Global plan of action for the conservation and sustainable utilisation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. Leipzig, Germany.

Wooten, S. 2003. Losing ground: Gender relations, commercial horticulture, and threats to local plant diversity in rural Mali. *In* Howard, P.L. ed. 2003. Women and plants, gender relations in biodiversity management and conservation, London, ZED Books.

## Web sites

FAO Web site on Plant Genetic Resources: [www.fao.org/ag/agp/agps/pgr/default.htm](http://www.fao.org/ag/agp/agps/pgr/default.htm)

International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources (IU): [www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/IU.htm](http://www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/IU.htm)

ITPGRFA or International Seed Treaty: [www.fao.org/AG/CGRFA/ITPGR.htm](http://www.fao.org/AG/CGRFA/ITPGR.htm)

Global Plan of Action, Leipzig, 1996: [www.fao.org/WAICENT/Faoinfo/Agricult/AGP/AGPS/GpaEN/leipzig.htm](http://www.fao.org/WAICENT/Faoinfo/Agricult/AGP/AGPS/GpaEN/leipzig.htm)

Convention on Biological Diversity: [www.biodiv.org/convention/articles.asp](http://www.biodiv.org/convention/articles.asp)

Global Strategy for the Management of Farm Animal Genetic Resources: [www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/AnGR.htm](http://www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/AnGR.htm)

CEDAW: [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw)



This fact sheet is part of the Training Manual “**Building on Gender, Agrobiodiversity and Local Knowledge**”. **FAO, 2004.**



**Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations**

Gender and Development Service  
Sustainable Development Department

Viale delle Terme di Caracalla — 00100 Rome, Italy

Fax: (+39) 06 57052004

E-mail: [links-project@fao.org](mailto:links-project@fao.org)

Web site: [www.fao.org/sd/links](http://www.fao.org/sd/links)