



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

REPORT

First Meeting of the Steering Committee for the FAO Global Conference on Green Development of Seed Industries

Online via Zoom
16 July 2021



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1. Opening Remarks

The Director of the FAO Plant Production and Protection Division (NSP) welcomed participants to the meeting and passed the floor to the FAO Deputy Director-General and Chair of the Steering Committee, Ms Beth Bechdol, to open the meeting and deliver her opening remarks. She began by saying it was a great honour to address the Committee members on the occasion of its first meeting, noting that the conference has high strategic importance for FAO. Coming from a multi-generational family grain farm, she said she knew personally about the critically important contribution of quality seeds of improved crop varieties to agrifood systems transformation, protection of the environment and to the livelihoods of farmers and rural communities around the world.

She underlined that we cannot have good crops without good seeds. Noting that the world is facing unprecedented challenges, such as climate change and the rising global population, she emphasized that it will be necessary to produce more in the future, and to do this with less inputs. Countries around the world are increasingly aware that urgent action is needed to overcome these challenges and to deliver on the shared commitments to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. So, more food needs to be produced, but it must also be safe and nutritious and, ultimately, produced without damaging the planet.

Ms Bechdol said that FAO Members recently endorsed FAO's Strategic Framework, its strategic plan for the next 10 years, which seeks to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems. The Strategic Framework acts through the aspirations of the 'four betters', i.e., better production, better nutrition, better environment and a better life, all while leaving no one behind.

She emphasized that FAO envisages production systems that are knowledge- rather than input-intensive and that the Organization continues to work to respond to increasingly complex issues at the heart of the food security and sustainability nexus. Here, innovation is important and she was very happy that Ms Elouafi, FAO's first Chief Scientist, who also oversees FAO's new Office of Innovation, was serving as the Chair of the Scientific Advisory Panel and so would be very much involved in the development of the conference.

Ms Bechdol concluded by noting that the FAO Secretariat had provided everyone with the relevant documentation for the different agenda items in advance of the meeting and that FAO was honoured to have such a recognized and distinguished group of experts and thought leaders as members of the Steering Committee.

2. Self-Introductions

As one of the aims of the meeting was to enable the Committee members to meet and get to know each other, Ms Bechdol asked the Committee members to introduce themselves. Fourteen of the

fifteen Committee members attended the meeting and each one introduced themselves, providing information on their professional background, expertise and experience and, in most cases, some perspectives regarding why they were interested in contributing to the organization of the conference. The members underlined the importance of seeds for food security, nutrition and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and expressed sentiments such as 'seed is almost the alpha and omega of agriculture' and 'it all starts with the seed'. They expressed their enthusiasm for being involved in the organization of the conference.

3. Overview of the Conference

The Director of NSP, Mr Jingyuan Xia, gave a presentation describing the background, rationale, objectives, core activities, expected outputs and governance structure of the conference. He began by affirming that seeds are the foundation of agriculture to produce the necessities for our daily lives such as food, feed, fibre and fuel. He reiterated the importance of seeds in agriculture and how essential they are to achieving the SDGs and to the implementation of FAO's new Strategic Framework. He outlined the major challenges in agriculture and opined that the adoption of green agriculture, green crop production and protection and green seeds would contribute to their solutions.

Regarding the conference, he noted that the previous World Seed Conference took place at FAO Headquarters on 8-10 September 2009, co-organized by FAO, the OECD Seed Scheme, UPOV, ISF and ISTA while the First World Seed Conference took place on 6-8 September 1999 in Cambridge, UK and was co-organized by ISTA, FIS, ASSINSEL, OECD and UPOV. Building on the conference's concept note¹, he outlined that the Objectives of the upcoming conference are to:

- **Increase awareness** of the contributions of the seed industry to green innovation of plant production
- **Promote cooperation** between sectors, especially for public-private partnerships
- **Foster priority setting and the targeted mobilization and pooling** of scientific, technical and financial resources for strengthened seed systems
- **Debate evidence and share updated knowledge** about green development of the seed industries

He also stated that the expected outcomes of the conference were:

- **A Communiqué** to increase awareness of the contributions of the seed industry to green innovation of plant production
- **Identification** of priority intervention areas where key stakeholders, including FAO, can support countries to strengthen their seed systems; and of potential actions and strategies that will best support countries to assist their farmers to increase their access to desirable and quality seeds
- **Increased recognition** of FAO as a trusted convener of evidence-based discourse on the green development of seed industries
- **Proceedings** of the conference to advocate the green development of the seed industry

In terms of the governance of the conference, he said that its organization was being facilitated by the Steering Committee, chaired by Ms Bechdol; this is tasked to provide strategic advice to FAO on the organization of the Conference. The other facilitating body is the Scientific Advisory Panel, chaired by Ms Elouafi, which will assist with the drafting of the programme. Finally, the FAO Secretariat, of which he is Executive Secretary, had the overall responsibility for the organization of the event.

4. The Roles of the Steering Committee and the Scientific Advisory Panel

¹ <http://www.fao.org/3/cb5142en/cb5142en.pdf>

The Deputy Director of NSP, Mr Rémi Nono Womdim, gave a brief overview of the key responsibilities of the Committee, namely to:

- Provide advice on all aspects of the conference;
- Provide advice to the Scientific Advisory Panel;
- Provide advice on resource mobilization;
- Act as the event's ambassador among the respective organizations/networks/countries of the Steering Committee members;
- Encourage people to attend the conference; and
- Provide advice on potential follow-up to the conference.

He also noted that Committee members had been sent a document with the names of the Scientific Advisory Panel members and that the specific role of the Panel was to:

- Develop a draft programme covering the main conference topics;
- In doing so, provide proposals for the names of potential keynote speakers, presenters, panelists and chairs for the different sessions;
- Ensure there is gender and geographical balance in the proposals; and
- Submit a draft programme proposal for consideration by FAO.

5. Conference Programme and the Steering Committee Workplan

The Leader of the NSP Seeds and Plant Genetic Resources Team, Mr Chikelu Mba, informed the Committee that FAO had identified four main themes to guide its organization of the conference. He also described the tentative agenda that FAO had developed for the 2-day event which envisaged that there would be a plenary session with 5 keynote presentations in the morning of Day 1; a plenary session with a high-level segment on the afternoon of Day 2; and, in between these two, in the afternoon of Day 1 and the morning of Day 2, pairs of parallel sessions dedicated to the four main conference themes.

He informed the Committee members that working groups had been established for each of these four themes to prepare the programme for their respective pairs of parallel sessions and that a fifth cross-thematic working group had also been established to provide FAO with advice regarding the keynote presentations, the high-level segment and the communiqué. Two co-leaders had been identified for each working group and, during the Scientific Advisory Panel meeting on 12 July, the Panel members were encouraged to join one or more of the working groups. The working groups, with the names of the respective co-leaders, are:

1. Emerging technologies, including new plant breeding techniques (Rajeev Varshney and Vittorio Venturi);
2. Conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (Lamis Chalak and Charlotte Lusty);
3. Crop varietal development and adoption (Cathie Martin and Emmanuel Okogbenin);
4. Seed production, quality assurance, seed trade and enabling laws and policies (Keshavulu Kunusoth and Niels Louwaars); and
5. Cross-thematic - Keynote presentations; high-level segment; communiqué (Rachel Chikwamba and Long Mao).

Regarding the 5 keynote presentations, he said that the initial proposal had been to dedicate one each to the four conference themes and the fifth one to 'green development of seed industries' but that the current thinking was to have one each for the following topics: policies and regulations; emerging and high technologies; applied research – conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture and their use in crop improvement; the value chain from seed production to farmers' fields; and green development of seed industry in China.

He illustrated the workplans of both the Scientific Advisory Panel and the Steering Committee, noting that the Panel was expected to produce a draft proposal of the programme by mid-August and that the Steering Committee was then expected to provide comments/advice by the beginning of September.

6. Report from the First Meeting of the Scientific Advisory Panel, 12 July

The FAO Chief Scientist and Chair of the Scientific Advisory Panel, Ms Elouafi, gave a brief report of the Scientific Advisory Panel's first meeting, which took place on 12 July. She said it was a great meeting in which twenty-two of the twenty-three members attended. During the meeting, she felt a lot of engagement and excitement about the conference. Regarding the meeting format, she said it was similar to that of the Steering Committee, with self-introductions followed by presentations about the conference from the FAO Secretariat and an open discussion.

Some key things she saw from the meeting were that:

- The Panel members were very much engaged and there was strong positive and collaborative spirit among them.
- Five working groups were established, four that cover each of the four main conference themes and one that is cross-thematic. As the Panel is big (23 members), it was considered that having people collaborating in smaller working groups was needed.
- There was very good interactive discussion, where, *inter alia*, the members emphasized the need to ensure cross-fertilization and cross-communication between the different working groups.

7. Open Discussion

Ms Bechdol thanked the four speakers and agreed that there had been a very engaging and productive discussion at the Scientific Advisory Panel meeting on 12 July. She then opened the floor for questions and comments regarding any of the previous four agenda items. Before doing so, she informed the Committee that she would have to leave the meeting half-way through the discussion and that Ms Elouafi would then take over the chair's role until the end of the meeting.

The Committee members provided a rich set of comments, including that:

- A bridge is needed to the UN Food Systems Summit, as the outcome and the discussions ongoing there need to be part of the discussions for the FAO Global Seed Conference.
- A bridge is also needed to the work being done at the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.
- The goal should be to build choice for farmers, about solutions to be provided to farmers and how the farmers can get access to these solutions.
- It is essential to consider farmers not as beneficiaries, but as partners, in this conference.
- Farmer-managed seed systems and farmers rights in relation to selection and conservation of plant genetic resources were important.
- When speaking about partnership and public-private partnerships, we need to consider that farmers are among the private sector, so public, private and farmer partnerships should be envisaged.
- Global seed conferences took place in 1999 and 2009. However, still we are talking about strengthening seed systems. This conference will be held in 2021: How can we ensure there will be post-conference impact?
- There are important distinctions between molecular tools, like genomic selection, and recombinant DNA technologies and they should not be grouped together in the agenda.

- Seed systems development is an area that needs improvement and it should be the focus of the conference. If, after the conference, people have a clear vision and a shared understanding of what is meant by seed systems development, this would be an important achievement.
- Seed systems development has a demand dimension (including what determines whether farmers like or wish to adopt new varieties, covering crop insurance, information, farm services, access to markets and more) and a supply dimension (how to produce relevant products, including bottlenecks that hold back the seed industry, the important role that informal seed systems can have in certain settings etc.).
- When talking about innovation, there is a need to talk about policies and regulation, so this should be the focus of a keynote address.
- Policies can have real impacts, for example in accelerating the release of approved crop varieties from neighbouring countries, and if implemented correctly at the country level they can be a game-changer.
- There should be a theme in the conference dedicated to the governance issues surrounding the access, use and distribution of seeds because, even if we have the best technologies, no impacts will be achieved unless the policy environment is conducive.
- In the current conference agenda, there seems to be too much emphasis on the means – the new tools, processes and technologies applied to the seed industries – compared to the ends – the outputs or impacts that we have to expect from the seed systems in the future (many of which are functioning in important emerging nexuses, like the food-nutrition-health nexus or the food-water-energy nexus).

Ms Elouafi thanked all the Committee members and gave the opportunity for the presenters from the FAO Secretariat to respond to the comments. They expressed their appreciation to the Committee members for their very relevant and valuable comments. They indicated that the feedback would be conveyed to the Scientific Advisory Panel and that Ms Elouafi, as a member of the Steering Committee member and chair of the Scientific Advisory Panel, would play a key role in ensuring that these perspectives are fed into the work of the Panel. Regarding the post-conference impact, there was full agreement that the conference would not be held just to organize the meeting but should have a legacy. Regarding the need to distinguish between molecular tools, like genomic selection, and recombinant technologies, there was also full agreement and it was noted that the current agenda put them in two separate parallel sessions.

8. Closing Remarks

After ascertaining that the Committee members had no further comments to make, Ms Elouafi delivered her take-home messages from the discussion. She said that what she had heard was that the Committee members:

- Considered that more space needed to be given to policies and regulation in the programme.
- Desired more emphasis to be placed on the seed system per se as a whole.
- Wanted to see the seed sector being considered as part of the whole food system and saw the need to connect with the UN Food Systems Summit.
- Wanted the conference to cover the new trends (the new nexuses), to make sure that the seed sector is part of the ongoing discussions on the food systems.

She said that the FAO Secretariat, in collaboration with the Scientific Advisory Panel, was going to look at those comments and try to address them. She indicated that FAO would also aim to articulate two to three high-level outcomes regarding what FAO wants from the conference and how it links to the global food systems discussion. She concluded by saying that FAO would circulate a report of this meeting to the Committee members to make sure their inputs were documented, and she thanked everyone for participating and for agreeing to be part of the Steering Committee.

Annex 1: Meeting Agenda

Chair and Moderator: Ms. Beth Bechdol, Deputy Director-General of FAO

ITEMS	DOCUMENTS	PRESENTER	TIME (mins)
1. Opening Remarks		Ms. Beth Bechdol, Deputy Director-General of FAO, Chair of the Steering Committee	5
2. Self-introductions	Document with list of Committee members	Steering Committee members	10
3. Overview of the Conference	Concept Note	Mr. Jingyuan Xia	10
4. The Roles of the Steering Committee and the Scientific Advisory Panel	-Terms of Reference (ToRs) for the Steering Committee - ToRs for the Scientific Advisory Panel - Membership of the Scientific Advisory Panel	Mr. Rémi Nono Womdim, Deputy Director of NSP	5
5. Conference Programme and the Steering Committee Workplan	- Document with the tentative programme, describing also the four conference themes - Committee workplan	Mr. Chikelu Mba, Leader of the FAO Seeds and Plant Genetic Resources Team, NSP	10
6. Report from the First Meeting of the Scientific Advisory Panel, 12 July		Ms. Ismahane Elouafi, FAO Chief Scientist, Chair of the Scientific Advisory Panel	5
7. Open Discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the Conference • The Role of the Committee • Conference Programme and the Committee Workplan • Report from the First Meeting on the Scientific Advisory Panel • Other relevant issues 		Moderated by Ms. Beth Bechdol and Ms. Ismahane Elouafi	40
8. Closing Remarks		Ms. Ismahane Elouafi	5

Annex 2: List of Participants

Steering Committee Members		
1	Ms. Beth Bechdol	Deputy Director-General of FAO, Italy. Steering Committee Chair.
2	Mr. Hanzhong Wang	Vice President, Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS), China
3	Mr. Yemi Akinbamijo	Executive Director, Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), Ghana.
4	Mr. Marco Ferroni	Chair, CGIAR System Board, France.
5	Ms. Ismahane Elouafi	Chief Scientist, FAO, Italy. Scientific Advisory Panel Chair.
6	Mr. Mauricio Lopes	Research Scientist, Embrapa Agroenergy, Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), Brazil. Former President of Embrapa (2012-2018).
7	Mr. Rakesh K. Singh	Program Leader and Principal Scientist (Plant Breeding), Crop Diversification and Genetics, International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA), United Arab Emirates.
8	Mr. Robert Bertram	Chief Scientist, Bureau for Resilience and Food Security, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United States of America.
9	Mr. Michael Keller	Secretary General, International Seed Federation (ISF), Switzerland.
10	Mr. Alberto Lipparini	Secretary General, Italian Seed Association (Assosementi), Italy.
11	Mr. Kent Nnadozie	Secretary, International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), FAO, Italy.
12	Mr. Jingyuan Xia	Director, FAO Plant Production and Protection Division, Italy.
13	Ms. Lorena Basso	President of the family company, Basso Semillas, Argentina. President of the Argentinian Seed Association (ASA) and the Seed Association of the Americas (SAA).
14	Ms. Fatma Ben Rejeb	Chief Executive Officer, Pan-African Farmers' Organization (PAFO), Rwanda.

Seed Conference Secretariat		
1	Mr. Rémi Nono Womdim	Deputy Director of NSP
2	Mr. Chikelu Mba	NSP Senior Officer
3	Mr. Wilson Hugo	NSP Agricultural Officer
4	Mr. John Ruane	OINR Senior Agricultural Innovation Specialist
5	Ms. Chantal Wedge	Intern for the Global Seed Conference
6	Mr. Mirko Montuori	NSPD Project Officer

7	Ms. MariaSoledad FernandezGonzalez	NSP Digital Communication Specialist
8	Mr. Haekoo Kim	NSP Technical Adviser
9	Ms. NdeyeNdack Diop	NSP Agricultural Officer
10	Ms. Arshiya Noorani	NSP Agricultural Officer
11	Mr. Lucio Olivero	NSP Seed Specialist
12	Ms. Bonnie Furman	NSP Agricultural Officer