



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



The International Treaty
ON PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES
FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Item 6 of the Provisional Agenda

NINTH SESSION OF THE GOVERNING BODY

New Delhi, India, 19–24 September 2022

Report of the Secretary

Executive Summary

This document contains the Report of the Secretary of the International Treaty to the Ninth Session of the Governing Body on technical, administrative, and financial activities under his mandate and on other activities delegated by the Governing Body at the Eighth Session.

Guidance Sought

The Governing Body is invited to take note of the Report and provide any guidance it considers appropriate on the range of relevant issues raised in this document.

FAO-ITPGRFA documents can be consulted at: www.fao.org/plant-treaty/meetings/meetings-detail/en/c/1259571/

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This report provides a summary of intersessional processes and activities that the Secretary has overseen since the last Session of the Governing Body, as well as policy and operational developments of relevance to the preparation of the Ninth Session. It also contains a short update on the implementation of the activities undertaken by the Secretary in relation to various processes, including the research work on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the relevant processes for the development of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). Furthermore, it contains a synthetic account regarding the implementation of the Communication Strategy of the International Treaty. Additionally, the document provides information on other activities undertaken at the request of the Bureau of this Ninth Session of the Governing Body, as well as other recent developments derived from its functions.

2. With regard to financial matters, the report provides an overview of issues and trends in the finances of the International Treaty during the last biennium, while the detailed information on the current state of the finances are provided in the documents under Agenda Item 17.

II. MEMBERSHIP OF THE INTERNATIONAL TREATY

3. Since the Eighth Session of the Governing Body, the Secretary has intensified his efforts to increase the membership of the International Treaty, by encouraging and providing information to non-Contracting Parties on the importance of joining the Treaty. Three additional countries joined the International Treaty, Mozambique, for whom it entered into force on 31 December 2020, South Sudan on 27 April 2020, and the Dominican Republic on 2 May 2022, raising the total number of Contracting Parties up to 149.

4. The Secretary also facilitated the dispatch of customised letters by the FAO Director-General to several non-Contracting Parties, further encouraging them to join the International Treaty. During this period, the Secretary was informed that Nigeria has also concluded the relevant approvals for the ratification of the International Treaty and that the Government is in the process to deposit the instrument of ratification.

5. The Secretary worked closely with relevant government officials and departments in non-Contracting Parties to support national consultations workshops and awareness-raising events. He also collaborated with the FAO Country Offices to highlight the crucial role of the International Treaty through dedicated meetings and through the provision of technical advice and customized.

III. UPDATE ON INTERSESSIONAL MEETINGS, MAJOR PROCESSES AND RELEVANT ACTIVITIES

6. This section illustrates some of the major milestones and provides some useful references to understand the implementation of the Programme of Work adopted by the Eighth Session of Governing Body and the documentation that has been produced.¹ As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the meetings held during the intersessional period took place in virtual modality and, given the format, they required previous or subsequent work to be undertaken electronically and in close consultation with the respective co-chairs. The reports from all the intersessional committees and bodies have been made online and to the Ninth Session of the Governing Body.

Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing

7. The Secretary has continued supporting the daily operations of the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing through its dedicated helpdesk. The System has reached more than 6,3 million materials transferred in 2022. The website section has been completely reviewed and enriched

¹ The reports from intersessional committees are available at www.fao.org/plant-treaty/meetings/meetings-detail/en/c/1259571/

with training resources, while virtual training events were conducted in collaboration with partners. In early 2022, the publication of the Educational Module on the Multilateral System, as requested by the Governing Body, completed the set of publications planned a decade ago. Additional information is presented in the *Report on the Implementation and Operations of the Multilateral System*.²

8. The Secretary considers it of utmost importance to continue maintaining the Multilateral System as an ongoing operational mechanism, as well as the support to users and Contracting Parties for its implementation. The need to guarantee essential functions for the Multilateral System, is reflected in document, IT/GB-9/22/18, *Draft Work Programme and Budget for the 2022–2023 Biennium*.

9. In the current biennium, the Secretary has supported, upon request, some of the Contracting Parties that have organized informal discussion on the enhancement of the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing and has supported the distribution of relevant information within the Regions. In particular, the Secretary wishes to highlight the informal consultations convened by the Government of Switzerland, reported to the Bureau with detailed information provided to the Governing Body at this Session.

Funding Strategy and the Benefit-sharing Fund

10. During the biennium, the Standing Committee on the Funding Strategy and Resource Mobilization met five times virtually and developed the *Draft Food Processing Industry Engagement Strategy* and interacted with relevant organizations on resource mobilization activities.

11. The Committee agreed on the launch of the Fifth Call for Proposals of the Benefit-sharing Fund, including on its process and the timeline. Given the prevailing pandemic, the Secretary and the Secretariat appreciated the flexibility that was demonstrated to the proposed dates set out in the indicative timeline to accommodate any unforeseen disruptions or delays. Additional information is presented in the *Report of the Standing Committee on the Funding Strategy and Resource Mobilization to the Ninth Session of the GB-9*.³

Global Information System

12. Up to 1.2 million PGRFA materials were registered in the biennium with Digital Object Identifiers and a renewed GLIS Portal was launched in 2021. The Portal offers a directory of links to sources of PGRFA and other relevant information services provided by partner organizations and relevant institutions. The Secretary facilitated the fourth meeting of the Scientific Advisory Committee, held virtually in April 2021, and the revision of the draft Programme of Work on the Global Information System.

13. The Secretary released a list of passport descriptors for crop wild relatives conserved *in situ*, with the participation of a wide group of international experts and initiated the testing in selected countries of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean, and the Near East through a dedicated project funded by the Government of Germany. It further published six booklets with characterization and evaluation descriptors for six tropical fruit trees, in collaboration with partner organizations. The booklets were also recognized as a valuable contribution to the observance of the International Year of Fruits and Vegetable. More information on the activities and the draft revised programme are contained in document *Report on the Implementation of the Global Information System*.⁴

² IT/GB-9/22/9.1.

³ IT/GB-9/22/10.

⁴ IT/GB-9/22/11.

Implementation of Farmer's Rights

14. The *Ad Hoc* Technical Expert Group on Farmers' Rights (Expert Group) met virtually for its third meeting in August 2020 and for its fourth meeting in May and August 2021. The Expert Group developed the *Options for encouraging, guiding and promoting the realization of Farmers' Rights as set out in Article 9 of the International Treaty*, with two remaining elements, as contained in the document, IT/GB-9/22/13.3, for the consideration of the Governing Body.

15. The Expert Group advised the Secretary to update the *Inventory of National Measures, Best Practices and Lessons Learned on the Realization of Farmers' Rights as set out in Article 9 of the International Treaty* and on its categories. It further invited the Secretary to bring the document to the attention of the Ninth Session of the Governing Body for its information.⁵

Conservation and Sustainable Use

16. The fifth and sixth meetings of the Ad Hoc Technical Committee on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ACSU) were held virtually in October 2021 and February 2022, respectively. In addition to the report of the Committee, the Secretariat also prepared the document, IT/GB-9/22/12, *Report on the Implementation of Conservation and Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*, for the Session.

17. The Committee acknowledged the importance of the Toolbox on Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, and recommended that the Secretary prepare an information note for the Ninth Session of the Governing Body explaining the new prototype and including a communication strategy and visibility plan.⁶

18. The Committee also considered the preliminary analysis from the draft study, *Bottlenecks and challenges to the implementation of Articles 5 and 6 of the International Treaty*. The Committee suggested additional sources of information for the study, and noted that the Secretary would bring it to the attention of the Ninth Session of the Governing Body. The Committee further suggested that future work on Articles 5 and 6 could initially focus on policy and institutional matters.⁷

19. The Committee advised the Secretary to continue the discussions with partners interested in developing and implementing a *Joint Programme on Biodiversity in Agriculture for Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*. The Committee further advised the Secretary to update the concept note in collaboration with interested partners and other relevant units of FAO, for the consideration of the Ninth Session of the Governing Body.⁸

Compliance

20. The Secretariat supported Contracting Parties with the preparation and submission of the national reports on the implementation of the International Treaty, according to Section V.3 of the *Procedures and Operational Mechanisms to Promote Compliance and Address Issues of Non-Compliance*, and published all the reports online. Specifically, the Secretariat provided support to Contracting Parties through webinars, direct communications and updates to the website, which now features a "frequently asked questions" section.

21. The fourth meeting of the Compliance Committee was held virtually in February 2021 and, following the meeting, continued to work electronically to finalize its report to the Ninth Session of the Governing Body. The report submitted to the Governing Body analysed 79 national reports

⁵ IT/GB-9/22/13/Inf.1, *Updated Inventory of National Measures, Best Practices and Lessons Learned from the Realization of Farmers' Rights, as set out in Article 9 of the International Treaty*.

⁶ IT/GB-9/22/12/Inf.1, *Prototype of the Toolbox for Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*.

⁷ IT/GB-9/22/12/Inf.2, *Background Study on Bottlenecks and Challenges to the Implementation of Articles 5 and 6 of the International Treaty*.

⁸ The Joint Programme is annexed to the document, IT/GB-9/22/12, *Report on the Implementation of Conservation and Sustainable Use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture*.

received from Contracting Parties up to 15 August 2021. The Report, which contains a draft Resolution, lists a number of potential activities and approaches considered by the Committee for its future work, as well as other matters of relevance for its mandate to support Contracting Parties.⁹

Documentation

22. During the intersessional period, the Secretariat produced and published over 286 meeting documents, considering the extensive number of meetings, most of them held virtually. Of those, 109 were working documents; 113 information documents; 24 Reports; and 40 other documents. For the current session of the Governing Body, 62 documents are under preparation, of which 40 are working documents that are translated into FAO's official languages and 22 information documents.

IV. UPDATE ON OTHER ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE SECRETARY

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

23. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Secretariat conducted a survey between June and August 2020 of National Focal Points and partners of the Benefit-sharing Fund on the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the survey showed the immediate impacts on the major areas of implementation of the International Treaty as well as the project portfolio of the Fourth Cycle of the Benefit-sharing Fund (BSF-4). The outcomes of the process included the mitigation measures and contingency plans put in place to address possible impacts.

24. Following the surveys, the Secretary also organized an International Panel of Experts, held virtually on 15 September 2020, with the support of the Kingdom of Morocco and in collaboration with the Global Crop Diversity Trust. The panel outlined a number of possible next steps for the Bureau's guidance, including in relation to safeguarding collections at risk.¹⁰

25. The Secretary reported on these activities to the Bureau, summarizing the major messages from the panel. The Bureau welcomed the work carried out and appreciated the analytical evidence-based assessment undertaken. It further encouraged the Secretary to continue identifying the potential longer-term impacts and some preliminary institutional and policy implications of COVID-19 pandemic on the work of the International Treaty.

26. Additional information on activities in the biennium in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is available in the document, IT/GB-9/22/6.2, *Report on the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Implementation of the International Treaty*.

Emergency Reserve for Genebanks

27. The Governing Body and the Bureau had noted the importance of supporting collections of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGRFA) at risk, given the number of emergency situations and events posing threats to certain collections (e.g., arising from natural disasters, civil unrests or armed conflicts).

28. In November 2021, the Secretary launched the Emergency Reserve for Germplasm Collections at Risk, jointly established with the Global Crop Diversity Trust. The Emergency Reserve is designed to provide rapid, short-term and urgent support to collections in the Multilateral System, in cases of emergency and where no alternative financial support is available. Additional information can be found in the document, IT/GB-9/22/16.2.3, *Report on the Emergency Reserve for Germplasm Collections at Risk*.

⁹ IT/GB-9/22/14, *Report of the Compliance Committee*.

¹⁰ www.fao.org/plant-treaty/overview/partnerships/expert-panel

Global Network of Cryobanks

29. At its fourth meeting, the Bureau requested the Secretary to partner with the Crop Trust in accelerating the development of a global network of cryobanks through the International Treaty to safety-duplicate field and in vitro plant collections that are at risk. The Secretariat co-organized an international panel of experts with the Crop Trust on this matter in June 2021, *Cryopreservation: A long-term strategy for hard-to- conserve PGRFA collections in a post-COVID world*.¹¹

30. The objective of the panel was to bring together all key actors working on cryo-conservation and discuss potential elements of a global strategy for advancing cryo-conservation to support the Treaty implementation, including by developing a global network of cryobanks. The experts presented the status of cryopreservation work at national and regional levels, as well as in CGIAR centres, and examined the challenges and benefits of the technology. The experts further discussed the opportunity of developing and sustaining a global initiative for cryopreservation, in the framework of the International Treaty.

International Year of Fruits and Vegetables

31. The Secretariat joined the international community for the observance of the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables in 2021. In collaboration with the Crop Trust, the Secretary convened an international panel of high-level experts to highlight the importance of the genetic diversity of fruits and vegetables for food and nutrition security.

32. The panel, held virtually on 16 February 2021, illustrated how genetic resources of fruit and vegetable were conserved, shared and used. It presented views and perspectives from international genebanks, national programmes, researchers and breeders, the seed industry and non-governmental organizations. It also highlighted examples of development and production of fruit and vegetable varieties suited to diverse agro-systems and farming practices. Furthermore, it noted some of the challenges associated with the conservation and use of fruit and vegetable genetic resources, and identified future needs and possible actions.¹²

Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework and the Biodiversity Related Conventions

33. In the biennium, the Secretary followed the discussions and made inputs in the development of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), in coordination with the heads of the other members of the Liaison Group of Biodiversity-related Conventions (BLG).¹³ He also supported Contracting Parties participating in the process.

34. The BLG emphasised that the objectives and the mandates of these treaties and conventions should be taken into account and recognized within the new GBF. Their inclusion would allow Contracting Parties to take advantage of their experiences, the available indicators and the technical and legal processes that are ongoing under the respective Conventions.

V. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

35. Following the guidance received from the Governing Body at its Eighth Session and the Bureau of the Ninth Session, the Secretariat has developed a draft Capacity Development Strategy for the International Treaty (2023–2030). The draft reflects the inputs received from relevant subsidiary bodies, and the Bureau, and is now available for the consideration of the Governing Body.¹⁴

¹¹ www.fao.org/plant-treaty/meetings/meetings-detail/en/c/1492833/

¹² www.fao.org/plant-treaty/overview/partnerships/international-panel/en/

¹³ The members of the Biodiversity Liaison Group are: the World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention (WHC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar), the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), and the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

¹⁴ IT/GB-9/22/6.1.

36. The draft Strategy represents a general document outlining the guiding principles, strategic approaches and expected outcomes of capacity development. The draft strategy refers to players, resources and existing monitoring mechanisms to facilitate its future review by the Governing Body. The draft strategy builds on, and promotes country ownership. It is proposed that the draft strategy be accompanied by two, 4-year action plans.

VI. UPDATE ON ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATION

37. Communication has always been a central element of the Treaty's programme of work for each biennium in its mission to underline the importance of conserving and using food crops. The Treaty's website plays a fundamental role in conveying the importance and activities of the International Treaty, and is often the entry point for people to learn about its mandate and its work. The Treaty website has now been reviewed in its entirety, and its contents updated regularly. Furthermore, over 95 percent of its content is now available in all six official languages. Several key sections have been reviewed and improved with additional content, technical information, and statistics. The overall visual appearance of the website has been improved with a view to making it more accessible, user-friendly and appealing to multiple audiences. Additional information on the communication activities, the increased visibility of BSF projects, and the refresh of the overall branding for the International Treaty, can be found in the *Report on the Implementation of the Communication Strategy of the International Treaty*.¹⁵

38. In the next biennium, the International Treaty will have to continue enhancing the communication and outreach services it provides, and continue to further expand its reach to a wide variety of audiences. In collaboration with FAO, the Treaty will be innovative and more proactive in the use of social media channels and in the development of technically sound and visually appealing content of interest to policymakers and the general public.

39. Since June 2020, and following the hosting of the Secretariat of the International Treaty in the Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment (OCB) of FAO, the Secretariat has strengthened collaboration with other units under this office, including for the development of various information products and events relating biodiversity to climate action, bioeconomy and ecosystem services.

40. The Secretariat also organized and contributed to several international technical conferences, scientific panels and forums in the biennium. These efforts underpinned the Treaty's commitment to ensure that countries at all levels of development can get access to information and resources, in particular on the key role of crop biodiversity conservation and use for food security.

41. In preparing for the Ninth Session, the early selection and approval of the theme "*Celebrating the Guardians of Crop Diversity: Towards an Inclusive Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework*" helped in preparing information products, engaging with partners and facilitating the preparation of dedicated exhibits.

42. The designation of International Year of Millets 2023 by the 75th United Nations Assembly, at the initiative of the Government of India, have created for the Treaty a unique opportunity to advocate in the coming months for better use of some of the crops included in Annex I. The celebrations may contribute to increase their global production and ensure efficient processing and consumption. They can also help to promote a better utilization of crop rotations, encourage better connectivity throughout food systems and identifying millets as a key component of our food basket.

¹⁵ IT/GB-9/22/6/Inf.1.

VII. FINANCIAL UPDATE

43. The Secretary has prepared the document, IT/GB-9/22/18.2 Rev.1, *Financial and Progress Report of the Work Programme and Budget for the 2020-2021 Biennium*. It provides an overview of the status of the Treaty's finances as at 31 May 2022, together with information that may be pertinent when considering future needs resulting from the growth of the Treaty. The Secretary remains committed to increasing transparency and accountability in the use of resources within the framework of the Financial Rules of the Treaty and the financial system of FAO. In the spirit of increased transparency and accountability, the document contains significantly more details than previous reports.

44. The document covers, amongst others, the following subjects:

- a. Funding of the Core Administrative Budget, from both the FAO contribution and voluntary contributions from Contracting Parties;
- b. Receipt of contributions from Contracting Parties;
- c. Treaty core revenue;
- d. Expenditures under the Core Administrative Budget;
- e. The Working Capital Reserve;
- f. The Third Party Beneficiary Operational Reserve.

45. The provisional sum made available to the Treaty from FAO for the 2020–21 budget was USD 2 million. In accordance with Financial Rule 8.2, the Secretariat publishes the certified financial statement of expenditures online at the end of each financial year. These statements contain detailed information on the status of the Core Administrative Budget, including a comparative analysis with previous years.

46. At the First Special Session of the Governing Body, the Secretary informed Contracting Parties of the significant depletion of resources in the Special Fund to Support the Participation of Developing Countries in Treaty meetings and called for contributions. In 2022, the Secretary called for funds to provide travel support to ensure the participation of developing countries in the Ninth Session of the Governing Body.

VIII. NEW AND EMERGENCY CHALLENGES

47. The Secretary thanks the Bureau of the Ninth Session for the advice and guidance provided for the implementation of the Programme of Work, noting particularly the long intersessional period and its specificities that obliged all to navigate through unprecedented circumstances. The organization of the Special Session of the Governing Body in virtual modality, with *ad hoc* rules of engagement, preceded by extraordinary consultations, were possible thanks to a high level of trust, commitment and understanding from all Regions.

48. In looking forward, one lesson we could take into account is that we also need robust Treaty systems that are able to deliver beyond normal conditions. At the same time, we should make sure that the interrelations between the various committees are fluid and well defined and that the design of the Treaty procedures enables policy discussions. In this sense, the previous work undertaken for the *Review of Subsidiary Bodies and Intersessional Processes* may be extremely helpful.¹⁶

49. The Secretary receives regular requests for support to germplasm collections in situations that require an immediate assessment and response. These are situations where every day can make a difference in the future of the collection. Therefore, the launch of the Emergency Reserve for Collection as Risk constituted last year was an enormous step forward in the number of tools at our disposal to quickly act together in cases of emergency.

¹⁶ IT/GB-9/22/17.3.

50. Because of current realities, it is of utmost importance that the Reserve is duly capitalised and that the Governing Body receives information on its use and provides guidance for its future operations and evolution. While nobody is able to foresee every single type of threat, the international community cannot sit and wait for the next crisis. On the contrary, and in line with its objectives, there are expectations from the international community for the Treaty to play a proactive role in collaboration with other FAO units and relevant partners and donors, as may be required.

51. Following the guidance of the Governing Body, the Secretary followed the discussions for the development of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. At the time of preparation of this document, many critical elements of the Framework still remain to be finalised. At the same time, it will be critical for an immediate response to join efforts in supporting its implementation at the national level. In this context, the provision of assistance to Contracting Parties by the different international organizations, through structured programmes, remains a critical aspect that will need to be discussed and coordinated, once the new GBF is adopted. The Governing Body will also need to prepare to respond to it, when adopted.

52. In the international policy context, the Secretary witnessed the difficulties in agreeing on the main elements for the future regulation of Digital Sequence Information. Yet, the options identified, and the inputs provided by Governments and stakeholders, clearly show the significant interest in this matter. I consider it is time for the Treaty community to examine, in more detail, some of the future implications that the underlying technologies, patterns of use and related discussions may have for the objectives of the International Treaty.

53. The Eighth Session of the Governing Body could not reach consensus on the package of measures perceived as critical for the future of the International Treaty, the enhancement of the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing. Despite the pandemic, the long intersessional period may have provided sufficient time for Contracting Parties to reflect on the next steps and the further work to advance with the enhancement process. The Secretary has noted that there are high expectations from various stakeholder groups to consider, at this Session, the possible continuation of formal discussions.

IX. GUIDANCE SOUGHT

54. The Governing Body is invited to take note of the information and updates provided, and to provide any guidance it considers appropriate on the range of relevant issues raised in this document.