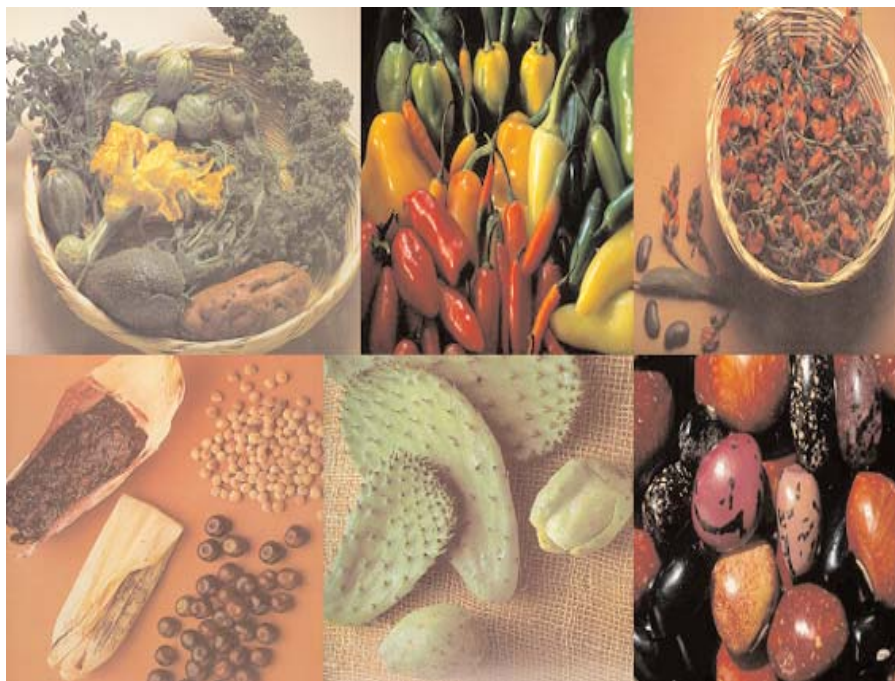


Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA)

José Esquinas-Alcázar



Summary

Agricultural biological diversity, often referred to in FAO as genetic resources for food and agriculture, is the storehouse that provides humanity with food, clothes and medicines. In spite of its vital importance for human survival, agricultural biodiversity is being lost at an alarming increased rate. Genetic resources can be conserved *ex situ* in gene banks, or *in situ*, either on-farm or in natural reserves. *In situ* conservation involves the protection of the areas, ecosystems and habitats in which plants of interest have developed their distinctive characteristics.



In 1983 the FAO conference (Resolution 9/83) established the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA), the first UN's permanent intergovernmental forum dealing with agro-biodiversity.

It is now universally accepted, and its current membership of 167 countries makes it widely inclusive. Its mandate covers all components of agro-biodiversity of relevance to food and agriculture: plants and animals, forestry, fisheries and micro-organisms.

Since its inception, the CGRFA has emphasized the importance of protecting *in situ* conservation areas, as a way to ensure continuous co-adaptation to a changing environment and human pressure, by maintaining the evolutionary dynamics of agricultural species in the human and agro-ecological sites in which they have evolved.

Nevertheless and although an increasing number of *in situ* conservation areas, including conservation on farm in traditional agricultural systems, are protected at the national level, conservation areas specifically for GRFA are still rare. The integrated approach to

in situ conservation taken by the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems project is a good example of the approach needed to be followed in this field.

On its 20th anniversary, the CGRFA celebrated its achievements, especially in the areas of crops and farm animal genetic resources. The Commission identified the development of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources with pioneering provisions for the implementation of Farmer's Rights and for a Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing as its main achievement.

It also recognized the limitations of taking purely sectorial approaches. It therefore recommended preparing a Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPoW) to be submitted at its Eleventh Session, in June 2007. The MYPoW will include work on the agro-ecosystem approach, integrating the various areas of biodiversity for food and agriculture. GIAHS, with its clear intersectorial agro-ecosystem approach is in line with this recommended new conceptual dimension.



The GIAHS project crystallizes the need for approaches that integrate the *in situ* conservation of genetic resources with related traditional knowledge and local technologies. The CGRFA, as FAO's permanent forum where governments discuss and negotiate matters relevant to genetic resources for food and agriculture, and their sustainable utilization and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits, could provide, if countries so wish, an ideal intergovernmental umbrella where GIAHS issues and concerns could be raised, and where priorities and policies could be defined.

GIAHS represents an initiative through which traditional knowledge and the agricultural resources

and diversity developed by our ancestors can be passed on to future generations, to face unpredictable environmental changes and human needs. A further development of GIAHS will be a great contribution of our generation to the future of mankind.

