

CGRFA 17 Highlights: Monday, 18 February 2019

The seventeenth session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA 17) opened today at the Headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN in Rome, Italy.

Delegates discussed the following issues:

- The Commission's work in raising awareness of the role of genetic resources for food and agriculture (GRFA) for food security and nutrition, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- Explanatory notes of distinctive features of GRFA use in different subsectors intended to complement the Elements on ABS in GRFA subsectors;
- "Digital sequence information (DSI)" on GRFA; and
- The role of GRFA in mitigation of and adaptation to Climate Change.

Opening

CGRFA 17 Chair William Wigmore (Cook Islands) opened the session. Maria Helena Semedo, FAO Deputy Director-General, highlighted the establishment of the biodiversity mainstreaming platform and current work on finalization of a strategy on mainstreaming. She stressed that the report on the State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (SOW-BFA) is a milestone in FAO history that will contribute to the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

CBD Deputy Executive Secretary David Cooper underscored biodiversity's contribution to food security and resilient agriculture and food systems, and noted that the voices of the agricultural sector are essential in designing the post-2020 biodiversity framework.

Kent Nnadozie, Secretary of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGR), highlighted the Treaty's achievements, including its Multilateral System (MLS) of ABS.

Irene Hoffmann, CGRFA Secretary reported on the Commission's intersessional activities, highlighting the finalization of the SOW-BFA and the draft report on the State of the World's Aquatic GRFA, noting that the SOW-BFA will be launched during the week.

Organizational Matters

Delegates adopted the meeting's agenda and provisional time table (CGRFA-17/19/1 and 1/Add.1Rev.1).

The Role of GRFA for Food Security and Nutrition

The Secretariat presented the review of the Commission's work on this item (CGRFA-17/19/2), containing sections on raising awareness of the role of GRFA, and the SDGs, and a Background Study Paper on biodiversity for food and agriculture and food security (Background Study Paper no. 69), which presents qualitative and quantitative analyses of food production and supply.

BRAZIL, with IRAN, asked to revise the Background Study Paper based on further comments by countries and additional literature before publishing it. The EUROPEAN REGIONAL GROUP (EUROPE), ASIA and SENEGAL supported the production of a brochure based on the Background Study Paper. The US said agriculture development policies, extension programmes, and nutrition need further substantive analysis before including them in a summary brochure.

ECUADOR encouraged considering the needs of family farming practices and smallholders in awareness-raising activities. EUROPE stressed the need to reflect the role of GRFA for food security and nutrition in the text of the Multi-Year Programme of Work. ASIA also suggested developing a manual or information system for data collection on wild food crops in home gardens. THAILAND called for strengthening work on GRFA by drawing links with relevant SDGs to increase awareness. AFRICA identified linkages between FAO and the UN High-Level Political Forum and the CBD to strengthen implementation in support of the SDGs. CANADA highlighted comprehensive strategies and programming designed to support sustainable food production in Canada.

ARGENTINA underscored resource mobilization, data collection on wild food crops, and showcasing the benefits of diversification of agricultural systems. KENYA stressed initiatives that demonstrate the role of GRFA, including on underutilized species that contribute to both food security and livelihoods. SUDAN called for focus on hidden hunger.

The INTERNATIONAL PLANNING COMMITTEE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY (IPC) stressed that small-scale food producers have successfully maintained biodiversity for thousands of years, while industrialized agriculture has had a great cost for biodiversity.

Access and Benefit-Sharing for GRFA

Report of the Team of Technical and Legal Experts on ABS (TTLE-ABS): Expert Team Vice-Chair Elzbieta Martyniuk (Poland) presented the report (CGRFA-17/19/3.1), including recommendations that: FAO disseminate the explanatory notes to the ABS Elements to all member countries and FAO regional and country offices; and subsector-specific scoping studies be undertaken on the current utilization of DSI in the different subsectors.

Distinctive Features and Specific Practices of Different Subsectors of GRFA: The Secretariat presented the draft explanatory notes developed by the TTLE-ABS (CGRFA-17/19/3.2) and additional inputs to the development of the notes (CGRFA-17-19/3.2/Inf.1, 3 and 4). Scott Miller (US), Rapporteur of the Expert Group on Micro-organism and Invertebrate GRFA (EG MIGR), presented the group's report (CGRFA-17/19/3.2/Inf.2), including recommendations on the importance of taxonomic work for the subsector, and on cooperation with the International Plant Protection Convention.

EUROPE suggested identifying challenges regarding ABS in different subsectors of GRFA to be addressed by the Commission's Intergovernmental Technical Working Groups (ITWGs), and the EG MIGR, which would result in recommendations on future work.

ASIA and BRAZIL requested compiling best practices and lessons learnt by countries while dealing with ABS. ECUADOR and AFRICA urged recognizing national legal measures and noted the need for monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness and impacts of ABS measures. ZIMBABWE and MOROCCO urged to connect the discussions on ABS with those on digital sequence information (DSI). The US and CANADA preferred to keep these discussions separate and supported disbanding the TTLE-ABS.

The NEAR EAST stressed that the cost of infrastructure for DSI is an important obstacle in developing countries. CHILE said discussions on ABS for GRFA should remain within the scope of the Commission's work and supported collecting policies, legislation, and administrative measures on ABS for GRFA by member states. ARGENTINA supported the inclusion of ABS in the work of the Commission's ITWGs.

ITPGR reported on the process for revision of its Standard Material Transfer Agreement (SMTA) and the revamping of the MLS. CBD said nearly 70 percent of its members are considering Nagoya Protocol Article 8 (Special Considerations), which includes considering the importance of GRFA. OXFAM stated the exchange of genetic resources among indigenous peoples should not be subjected to additional ABS measures.

The CGIAR CONSORTIUM said the ABS Elements and explanatory notes will support its partners in identifying best practices and ensuring compliance with the ABS framework. WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANIZATION (WIPO) noted its guide on Intellectual Property Issues in ABS Agreements, which supports countries on practical aspects of dealing with intellectual property. IPC said free prior informed consent (PIC) should be emphasized in order to protect the rights of farmers and fishers.

SEARICE said GRFA databases should require disclosure of the country of origin of genetic resources of which the DSI was obtained, and supported subsector-specific scoping studies for DSI, with emphasis on impacts for smallholders, indigenous peoples and local communities.

Chair Wigmore presented four deliverables to be reviewed by the ITWGs and the EG-MIGR before CGRFA 18: review of past work on ABS; an up-to-date survey of existing legislation and policy approaches, including best practices for different subsectors of GRFA and traditional knowledge; an overview of developments under other international agreements and instruments relevant to ABS for GRFA; and a proposal for options for future work of the Commission on ABS for the different subsectors.

Delegates agreed with the proposed deliverables. SWITZERLAND, ZIMBABWE, ECUADOR, ARGENTINA, and the NEAR EAST called for their review by the TTLE-ABS. The US and CANADA opposed involving the TTLE-ABS, noting its mandate has been completed. Deliberations on this topic will continue.

“Digital Sequence Information” on GRFA

The Secretariat presented documents on the item (CGRFA-17/19/4 and 4/Inf.1) and sought guidance on: the need for further analysis on DSI and GRFA; subsector-specific work on DSI by the Commission's subsidiary bodies; an invitation to countries and stakeholders to provide capacity building and financial support to allow developing countries to make use of, and benefit from DSI; and addressing the status and use of DSI in future SOW reports.

Jack Heinemann, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, presented the Exploratory Fact-Finding Scoping Study on DSI for GRFA (Background Study Paper no. 68), highlighting sections on:

terminology; current uses of DSI in biotechnologies; DSI's role in research and product development and GRFA management; and status of DSI storage and exchange.

ASIA urged investigating whether the dematerialized use of GRFA infringes the rights of GRFA owners and if stringent treatment of DSI leads to restrictions on research and development. ECUADOR supported in-depth analysis of DSI on GRFA. JAPAN proposed postponing of further analysis on DSI until after the fifteenth meeting of the CBD Conference of the Parties (COP) in late 2020. BRAZIL proposed investigating the implications of DSI use in critical food and agriculture areas such as crop and animal pathogens, including vaccines for livestock.

EUROPE noted that subsector-specific information could be useful and opposed the inclusion of DSI in all future SOW reports. Calling for benefit-sharing when DSI is used in commercial applications, COSTA RICA, AFRICA and INDONESIA stressed the “direct link” between DSI and genetic resources. CHILE, AFRICA and ARGENTINA highlighted the need to coordinate with other international bodies.

CBD noted that the CBD working group on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework could bridge divergent views on DSI. ITPGR highlighted its work towards a new definition of genetic parts and components in the draft revised SMTA, and the use of digital object identifiers.

The Role of GRFA in Mitigation of and Adaptation to Climate Change

Delegates considered the assessment of the role of GRFA in mitigation of and adaptation to climate change (CGRFA-17/19/5), and submissions by countries on the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines to Integrate Genetic Diversity into National Climate Change Adaptation Planning (CGRFA-17/19/5/Inf.1).

INDIA, BRAZIL, EUROPE, CANADA and SAUDI ARABIA supported preparing a scoping study on current knowledge of the role of GRFA. The US objected, preferring advancing the development of the proposed country-driven global assessment of the role of GRFA. AFRICA, IPC and the ARAB CENTER FOR THE STUDIES OF ARID ZONES AND DRY LANDS emphasized the urgent need for such a study. CGIAR suggested its upcoming consultation meeting on the promotion of crop genetic diversity to support adaptation could provide input.

Nutrition and GRFA

The Secretariat introduced the review of work on GRFA and nutrition, including FAO and country-level implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Mainstreaming Biodiversity into Policies, Programmes and National and Regional Plans of Action on Nutrition, and awareness-raising activities (CGRFA-17/19/6).

Discussions on this item will continue on Tuesday.

In the Corridors

Participants to the seventeenth session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture kicked off their deliberations on Monday with mixed expectations. Most agreed that the launch of the report on the State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture on Friday will be this session's highlight. One observer stressed that “this report offers an excellent opportunity to showcase biodiversity's contribution to sustainable development and thus link the work of the Commission to other global processes.” However, some urged not to underestimate the importance of the work on digital sequence information and its link with access and benefit-sharing (ABS). “These deliberations are vital for the future of agricultural research and development, and the Commission has a long-standing tradition of producing scientifically-robust products, to guide FAO work and support other processes,” one delegate noted, pointing to ongoing, sometimes arduous discussions under all ABS-related processes.