

## ITPGRFA GB 8 Highlights: Monday, 11 November 2019

Delegates to the eighth session of the Governing Body (GB 8) of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA or Treaty) met in plenary throughout the day, to hear opening and regional statements, address organizational matters, and initiate discussions on the Multilateral System (MLS) of access and benefit-sharing.

### Opening Ceremony

GB 8 Chair Christine Dawson (US) opened the session, inviting participants to observe a moment of silence for Armistice/Remembrance Day, including for those who “still suffer from conflict, oppression, and hunger.”

FAO Deputy Director-General Maria Helena Semedo stressed that “crop biodiversity is a treasure of human civilization and must remain a legacy for generations to come.” Welcoming recent ratifications by Georgia and Mongolia, she highlighted the need to: expand and optimize genetic diversity; build capacities; strengthen agricultural and development policies; and advocate the Treaty’s work in the international biodiversity-related policy arena.

Narendra Singh Tomar, Minister of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare, India, underscored food as the most fundamental right and the role of plant genetic resources in that respect. He called for an “operational, pragmatic, future-ready, and flexible” benefit-sharing framework, taking into account genetic sequence information and bridging the divide between the global North and South. He further highlighted India’s offer to host the next GB session.

Teresa Bellanova, Minister of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies, Italy, reiterated Italy’s commitment to a hunger-free world, and to benefit-sharing with a focus on diversification, smallholder farmers, and women as custodians of plant genetic resources.

Marie Haga, Executive Director, Global Crop Diversity Trust, stressed that the importance of the Treaty has never been greater, given the threats to food security and that no country is self-sufficient in crop diversity.

Michael Keller, International Seed Federation, pointed to industry’s contribution to plant breeding and Treaty deliberations, adding that broad use is the best way to maintain genetic diversity. François Burgaud, French Interprofessional Organisation for Seeds and Plants (GNIS), outlined their efforts to conserve agricultural biodiversity, including their financial contribution to the Benefit-sharing Fund (BSF), and their close collaboration with farmers.

Evalyne Adhiambo Okoth, farmers’ representative, reported on a BSF-supported project in western Kenya that aims to conserve, share, and use open-source seed varieties, respect local farmers’ rights, and build resilience to climate change.

Robert Watson, former Chair of both the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, outlined statistics illustrating that all fundamental global ecosystem services are in decline, and one million species are at risk of extinction. Emphasizing the crucial importance of biodiversity for the resilience of agricultural systems, he highlighted the need for: rapid transformation of our systems; cross-sectoral management at all levels; agro-ecological practices; and inclusive governance structures to address the current lack of trust.

Irene Hoffmann, Secretary, FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, highlighted the report on the State of the World’s Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, and invited parties to provide policy responses to its findings. She stressed the relationship between biodiversity and food systems, saying biodiversity is integral to ecosystem health and resilience of food production, and that the way we grow food has major implications for ecosystems and biodiversity.

Kent Nnadozie, ITPGRFA Secretary, called for parties to make decisions so that the Treaty stays current and relevant. He said the Treaty is well-positioned to contribute to addressing major global challenges, such as hunger and climate change, and encouraged parties to keep in mind mutually beneficial compromises.

FAO Assistant Director-General René Castro-Salazar underscored the need to work together to address issues related to: biodiversity loss and its drivers; *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation under new challenges such as climate change; and digital sequence information (DSI) and subsequent dematerialized production.

### Plenary

**Organizational Matters:** Delegates adopted the agenda, timetable, and list of observers (IT/GB-8/19/1, 1.2 Rev. 1, and 1.3), without amendments.

The Secretariat introduced documents on the work programme and budget for the next biennium (IT/GB-8/19/17, 17 Add.1, and 17.2). Plenary established a credentials committee and a budget committee, and elected Fadila Al Salameen (Kuwait) as Rapporteur.

**Regional Statements:** Canada, for NORTH AMERICA, appreciated that activities in the intersessional period have expanded, expressing hope that common ground can be achieved regarding enhancement of the MLS.

Rwanda, for AFRICA, stressed that GB 8 comes at a critical point for the Treaty’s implementation, emphasizing the need to address DSI, and adding that expansion of the MLS depends on effective operationalization of benefit-sharing.

Japan, for ASIA, emphasized the heavy GB 8 agenda, noting the need for all delegations to fully understand complex issues, especially regarding the MLS enhancement and the new funding strategy.

Lebanon, for the NEAR EAST, stressed that an enhanced MLS should prioritize a subscription system, include increased payment rates to meet expectations regarding benefit-sharing, and integrate DSI.

Australia, for SOUTHWEST PACIFIC, underscored the role of crop biodiversity for supporting livelihoods and building resilience in the region, highlighting the role of the Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees.

Pointing to intertwined and complex challenges, Brazil, for GRULAC, called for an increased and predictable flow of resources to the MLS, including through a subscription system. He requested due consideration of DSI and warned that ignoring the issue may jeopardize the Treaty's future. Malta, for the EUROPEAN REGIONAL GROUP (ERG), recognized the importance of an enhanced MLS to address future challenges.

KENYA said agreement on an enhanced MLS would be a major milestone and that consideration of DSI is necessary to ensure the functioning of the Treaty. ZIMBABWE urged the GB to address plant genetic resources in the context of disaster risk reduction. The CGIAR Consortium celebrated the 60,000 successful Standard Material Transfer Agreements (SMTAs) under the MLS to date, and expressed support for a subscription-based MLS that addresses DSI.

The International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) highlighted that DSI and gene drives are the "two elephants in the room." CIVIL SOCIETY emphasized that not addressing DSI would be a major loophole in any benefit-sharing system.

**Reports:** Plenary took note of the Chair's report (IT/GB-8/19/5) and the Secretary's report (IT/GB-8/19/6). Secretary Nnadozie pointed out the depletion of funds to support participation of developing countries and encouraged voluntary contributions. He drew attention to the draft framework for a capacity development strategy for the Treaty (IT/GB-8/19/6.2), highlighting its holistic approach. Participants then commented on the draft framework.

ASIA highlighted improving benefit-sharing in harmony with farmers' rights. NORTH AMERICA emphasized the need for voluntary contributions to enable developing country participation. On coordination and cooperation, NORTH AMERICA added the document should not be negotiated at GB 8 and that capacity building efforts need to reach beyond national focal points and incorporate a data-driven evaluating framework to be effective.

**15th Anniversary:** Secretary Nnadozie highlighted main achievements since the Treaty's entry into force and elements of a draft resolution (IT/GB-8/19/7).

Many supported the draft resolution. CANADA emphasized that the Treaty must catalyze conservation, utilization, and further development of genetic diversity. The ERG underscored the Treaty's unique multilateral approach and its role in the management of agricultural biodiversity, stressing new, innovative partnerships. ASIA stressed the responsibility of parties to support the Treaty financially; and emphasized that discussions must be based on sound technical footing. AFRICA highlighted regional projects, including capacity-building efforts, funded by the BSF.

BRAZIL drew attention to information technologies, noting significant capacity gaps to obtain and use such technologies, and underscored benefit-sharing implications. He further suggested, with ARGENTINA, including reference to ITPGRFA Article 18 (financial resources) in the draft resolution.

**MLS Implementation and Operations:** The Secretariat introduced relevant documents (IT/GB-8/19/8.1 Rev.1 and 8.1/2). JAPAN proposed requesting the Secretariat to examine possible improvements to the report format, such as including resource availability and actual use. The ERG asked to include more detailed information on transfers per country and year, including

domestic transfers. AFRICA suggested that parties who have not yet made their materials available should no longer have access to the MLS.

Indonesia, for G-77/CHINA, stressed increasing the coverage of the MLS, clarity on DSI, and sufficient focus on benefit-sharing. NORTH AMERICA suggested reviewing the situation of countries who have not placed materials in the MLS and identifying any difficulties they experience. GRULAC said reviews should be completed by GB 9. CIVIL SOCIETY called on the Third Party Beneficiary to investigate possible inconsistencies in regard to reporting requirements under agreements concluded under ITPGRFA Article 15.

**Enhancement of the Functioning of the MLS:** Hans Hoogeveen, Co-Chair of the MLS Working Group, noted that, despite significant earlier progress, the latest Working Group meeting could not bridge developed and developing country positions on DSI in relation to the expansion of Annex I. He expressed hope that DSI will be resolved this week, potentially through discussions on the Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPOW). He suggested suspending discussions on enhancing the MLS until the issue of DSI is resolved. Working Group Co-Chair Javad Mozafari noted that, despite major challenges, the Working Group has made progress on a subscription-based system, different levels of payment rates, and possibilities for expanding Annex I.

GB 8 Chair Dawson proposed suspending plenary to allow for informal and regional consultations on possible ways forward.

In the ensuing discussion, Hoogeveen emphasized that the Working Group had not adequately considered DSI. AUSTRALIA, the US, SWITZERLAND, and FINLAND supported the proposal to suspend plenary discussions. AFRICA and the NEAR EAST expressed readiness to engage on DSI, and AFRICA underlined that a compromise is within reach if political will exists. Some delegates suggested establishing a working group or contact group, to maintain momentum. JAPAN supported taking stock of the current functioning of the MLS, with a view to understanding its limitations. The session was suspended at 5:35pm, with plans to resume deliberations on Tuesday.

### *In the Corridors*

Participants gathered in Rome for the eighth session of the Governing Body (GB 8) of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture with mixed feelings. As the Treaty celebrates 15 years since its entry into force, many acknowledged that there have been important achievements. But they also recognized GB 8 as a critical point to adopt a package of measures to enhance the functioning of the Multilateral System (MLS) of access and benefit-sharing. In this package, an amendment to the Treaty's Annex I would enable broader access to plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, and was seen as a big concession by developing countries. In exchange, improving benefit-sharing under the MLS would generate much needed funds for agricultural research in these countries. While it was understood that improved benefit-sharing would integrate use of digital sequence information, this proved to be a particularly thorny issue. Following a last effort at informal consultations over the weekend, one participant reported that "agreement is still out of sight," sharing his grave concern that refusal by some countries to address the issue may jeopardize the Treaty's future. Another was cautiously optimistic. "With better understanding of the technical legal issues and some good faith, everybody will recognize that resolving the issue benefits the international community as a whole," she said. The mood was grim, however, as the day's deliberations were suspended early to allow for reflection and regional consultations.